

## CHAPTER 6

# Basic Data Collection Methods

Qualitative researchers typically rely on four primary methods for gathering information: (1) participating in the setting, (2) observing directly, (3) interviewing in depth, and (4) analyzing documents and material culture, with varying emphases. These form the core of their inquiry—the staples of the diet. This chapter provides a brief discussion of these basic methods to be considered in designing a qualitative study. Most studies use a combination of data collection methods. Several secondary and somewhat more specialized methods of data collection supplement them; these are discussed in Chapter 7. This discussion does not replace the many excellent, detailed references on data collection (we refer to many at the end of this chapter). Its purpose is to guide the proposal writer in stipulating the methods of choice for his study and in describing for the reader how the data will inform the research questions. At the end of these discussions, as appropriate, we provide a short narrative on the salient ethical issues that may arise. How the researcher plans to use these methods, however, depends on several considerations.

Chapter 1 presented an introductory discussion of the assumptions that shape qualitative methods. As the grounding for a selection of methods, we extend that discussion here, using Brantlinger's (1997) useful summary of seven categories of crucial assumptions for qualitative inquiry. While the discussion below suggests that these are binary positions, this is not the case. These sets of assumptions are more usefully grappled with as continua, which is how they are depicted in Table 6.1.

The first assumption concerns the researcher's views of the *nature of the research*: Is the inquiry attempting to be technical and neutral, intending to conform to traditional research within his discipline, or is it controversial and critical, with an explicit political agenda?

Table 6.1 Dimensions of Assumptions in Qualitative Inquiry

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Continua of Assumptions</i>
What is the nature of the research?	Technical and neutral ↔ Controversial and critical
What is the relationship with participants?	Distant and objective ↔ Intimate and involved
What is the "direction of gaze"?	Outward, toward others ↔ Inner contemplation and reflection
What is the purpose of the research?	Professional and private ↔ Useful to participants and the site
Who is the intended audience?	Scholarly community ↔ The participants themselves
What is the researcher's political position?	Neutral ↔ Explicitly political
What are the researcher's views on agency?	Passive ↔ Engaged in local praxis

SOURCE: Adapted from Brantlinger (1997).

Second, how does he construe his location, his *positioning relative to the participants*? Does he view himself as distant and objective or intimately involved in their lives? Third, what is the *"direction of gaze"*? Is it outward, toward others—externalizing the research problem—or does it include explicit inner contemplation?

Fourth, what is the *purpose of the research*? Does the researcher assume that the primary purpose of the study is professional and essentially private (e.g., promoting his career), or is it intended to be useful and informative to the participants at the site? Related to the fourth category is the fifth: Who is the *intended audience of the study*—the scholarly community or the participants themselves? Sixth, what is the researcher's *political positioning*? Does he view the research as neutral, or does he claim an explicitly political agenda? Finally, the seventh assumption has to do with how the researcher views the *exercise of agency*: Does he see himself and the participants as essentially passive or as "engaged in local praxis" (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 4)? Assumptions made in these seven categories shape how the specific research methods are conceived and implemented throughout a study. At the proposal stage, some judicious and explicit discussion of assumptions strengthens the overall logic and integrity of the proposal.

The many books and articles describing the various ways a qualitative researcher might use the four primary methods (as well as secondary ones) are typically silent about the researcher who is deaf or has hearing loss, the researcher who is visually challenged, the researcher who uses a wheelchair, and other researchers who have physical or sensory challenges. In the discussion below, we try to be sensitive to differences in the ways qualitative researchers might interact in a setting as they draw on their perceptual and kinesthetic strengths. At this point, we emphasize that in the proposal, the researcher would have to outline the specific challenges in conducting the proposed research, as well as strategies to build on his strengths to ensure that sound, reliable data are gathered.

## Observation

Observation is central to qualitative research. The term captures a variety of activities, including both hanging around in the setting—getting to know people and learning the routines—and using strict time sampling to record actions and interactions and a checklist to tick off preestablished actions. Whether enacted informally (as "hanging around" suggests) or formally (as using a checklist suggests), observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting. It is crucial that these observations be recorded—written down or voiced into a tape recorder. This record is frequently referred to as field notes—detailed, nonjudgmental (as much as possible), concrete descriptions of what has been observed. Few studies rely exclusively on observation (but see the discussion of interaction analysis in Chapter 7), as researchers have come to appreciate how difficult it is to base interpretations of actions and interactions only on observations or insights from participant interviews (whether formal or informal). Qualitative researchers have also come to acknowledge the power inherent in proffering interpretations made from the researcher's ideological standpoint.

Observation can be accomplished not only visually (as the discussion above suggests) but also through the other senses. A researcher with visual challenges could draw on his considerable auditory skills, his sense of touch, and his sense of smell to provide new and insightful descriptions of a particular setting.

In the early stages of qualitative inquiry, the emphasis is on discovery. The researcher may enter the setting with broad areas of interest but without predetermined categories or strict observational checklists. As noted in Chapter 3, this stance captures the degree to which the study is prefigured or open-ended. Through a more open-ended entry, the researcher is able to discover the recurring patterns of behavior, interactions, and relationships. After these patterns are identified and described through early analysis of field notes, checklists might become more appropriate and context sensitive. Focused observation may then be used at later stages of the study, usually to see, for example, if analytic themes explain behavior and relationships over a long time or in a variety of settings.

Observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry. It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings. Even in studies using in-depth interviews, observation plays an important role, as the researcher notes the interview partner's body language and affect, tone of voice, and other paralinguistic messages, in addition to words. When the researcher-as-observer depends on senses other than sight, observations about movement and tone of voice become generative sources of insights. It is, however, a method that requires a great deal of the researcher. Discomfort, uncomfortable ethical dilemmas, and even danger; the difficulty of managing a relatively unobtrusive role; and the challenge of identifying the big picture while finely attending to huge amounts of fast-moving and complex behavior are just a few of the challenges.

Focused observations go beyond just "hanging out." Planful and reflexive observers use observation systematically (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001). At the proposal stage, the researcher should describe the purpose of the observing, the phase of the study in which it is likely to be most fruitful, and how data recorded in field notes might be analyzed to respond to the research questions.

Sometimes when researchers want observational data, they can review literature and refine extant coding schemes that capture key elements of their study. For example, Schoenfeld (2013) found an array of such schemes for observing classrooms. His team also wanted it to be workable in a large-scale project and efficient for converting observation notes quickly into quantified scores for what takes place in mathematics classrooms. Qualitative research typically employs such prefigured observation schema when much is already known, either from previous research or from earlier explore-to-discover observation.

Figure 6.1 Sample Field Notes

FIELD NOTES	
Date: 2/01/08	
Location: Residence Director's (RD) Office	
Type of Setting: Preliminary meeting to discuss study	
Time in Setting: 1 hour	
<i>Tuesday, November 13, 1997, 12:40 p.m. Observation</i>	<i>Observer's Comments</i>
There are 17 children in the room. There are three adults: one teacher, one classroom assistant, and one student teacher (the student teacher is an older woman).	
The room is in the basement of the school. The school is a brick building about 90 to 100 years old. The room is about 40 feet by 30 feet. The room is carpeted and is sectioned off by furniture. There is an area with big books and a chart in the left-hand back corner of the room. Next to that is a shelf with a mixture of small books, tapes, and big books in baskets. Next to that is a small area with toy kitchen furniture and dolls. There is an area with several tables in front of the kitchen area. There are many small chairs pulled up to the table. In the front of the room is an area with a sand table. There is a semicircular table in the left-hand front corner of the room. The walls are colorful, covered with papers that have been made by the children. One wall has papers with apples on them. Another wall has papers with pictures of the children, with their names. There are several small windows in the room, and the florescent lighting seems to be the major source of light.	The teacher seems to have done a great job of making the room seem very inviting. The space itself is not optimal.
The children have just come into the room. They have put their coats and backpacks onto their hooks in the hall outside.	Most of the children appear to know the routine.

Field notes are not scribbles, although they may begin that way. The simple term "jottings" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 19) can be used to indicate the on-the-spot notes that a researcher might take. These are then elaborated into full field notes to be useful for subsequent analysis. To help in planning the observation process, the proposal writer should describe some explicit note-organizing and note-management strategies, indicating to the reader that he is capable of noting events and interactions and transforming them into usable field notes (Nespor, 2006).

Figure 6.1 provides an example of edited and "cleaned-up" field notes for a study of kindergarten teachers. For example, O'Hearn-Curran (1997) has formatted descriptive notes in a column on the left while reserving a second column on the right for her comments, which include her emerging analytic insights about the observed behavior. Observers' comments are often a quite fruitful source of analytic insights and clues that focus data collection more tightly (more on this in Chapter 8). They may also provide important questions for subsequent interviews. Also, the researcher should use them for self-critique and caution. For example, as he monitors, with cautions about the trustworthiness of his study, he should ask himself, "When my notes say the space is not optimal, is that my judgment? Should I pursue this as a line of inquiry, getting teachers' thoughts on 'optimal'?"

### Participant Observation

Developed primarily from cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology, participant observation (as this method is typically called) is both an overall approach to inquiry and a data-gathering method. To some degree, it is an essential element of all qualitative studies. As its name suggests, participant observation demands firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for study—the researcher is both a participant (to varying degrees) and an observer (also to varying degrees). Immersion in the setting permits the researcher to hear, see, and begin to experience reality as the participants do. Should any of these senses be a challenge for the researcher, he can draw on others to describe, for example, a cacophony of sounds in a classroom, the subtle ways people seek approval from superiors through eye contact, and the like. Ideally, the researcher spends a considerable amount of time in the setting, learning about daily life there. This immersion offers the researcher the opportunity to learn directly from his own experience. Personal reflections are integral to the emerging analysis of a cultural group, because they provide the researcher with new vantage points and with opportunities to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (Glesne, 2010).

This method of gathering data is basic to all qualitative studies and invites consideration of the role or stance of the researcher as a participant observer—his positionality. This consideration links back to the assumption articulated by Brantlinger (1997), presented in Table 6.1, regarding the researcher's relationship with participants. At the proposal stage, it is helpful to elaborate on the planned extent of participation: what the nature of that involvement is likely to be, how much about the study's purpose will be revealed to the people in the setting, how intensively the researcher will be present, how focused the participation will be, and how ethical dilemmas will be managed. In addition, it would be important for the researcher to describe how any physical differences would provide a unique perspective. In the proposal, the

researcher should be specific as to how his participation will inform the research questions. He will have laid out a plan for fashioning a role that, given his appearance and background, will help him be a participant, and for how, conversely, he will compensate for any barriers to his participating naturally. (Recall the discussion of role in Chapter 5.) Table 6.2 displays the relation between the researcher's chosen role and data collection methods.

#### Ethical Issues in Observation and Participant Observation

The ethical issues that arise in observation and participant-observation studies center on the principle of respect for persons. Are the research participants aware that a study is going on and that they are part of it? Are they agreeable to this? And, as the research unfolds, is their consent to participate continually renegotiated? The researcher must be diligent about confirming that the participants are aware and willing. The practice of informed consent can be complex and, as noted in Chapter 1, it is not a one-time event but an ongoing process.

Other complexities can arise when the study focuses on a group setting. Rossman recalls a dissertation that was an action research project on human rights awareness in an elementary

Table 6.2 Data Collection Methods Related to Observation Role

Method	Role			Comment
	I—Participant as Observer	II—Observer as Participant	III—Observer as Nonparticipant	
Observation and recording of descriptive data	+	+	+	Particularly useful to Role I in areas of guarded interaction and sentiment.
Recording direct quotations of sentiment	+	+	+	Same as above.
Unstructured interview	+	+	*	If the researcher is skillful, a structure emerges.
Structured interview guides	—	*	+	Most useful in survey work (e.g., census).
Detailed interaction guides	—	—	*	Most useful in small-group work.
Interaction frequency tallies	+	+	+	Meaningful in leadership studies.
Paper-and-pencil tests				Very helpful in certain circumstances for certain purposes.

Method	Role			Comment
	I—Participant as Observer	II—Observer as Participant	III—Observer as Nonparticipant	
—Questionnaires	—	—	+	
—Scales	—	—	+	
—Achievement or ability	—	—	*	
Written records				Very important to Role I in checking reliability of observed data.
—Newspapers	+	+	*	
—Official minutes	+	+	*	
—Letters	+	+	*	
—Speeches	+	+	*	
Radio and television reports	+	+	*	Same as above.

SOURCE: Lutz and Iannaccone (1969, p. 113). Reprinted with permission.

NOTE: +, likely to be used; \*, may occasionally be used; —, difficult or impossible to use.

school classroom. All but one child's parents agreed that their children could participate. How should the researcher handle observations that, quite naturally, included the one child whose parents did not approve his or her participation? How should he write field notes focusing on interactions among the children when that one child was present? Also subsumed under the principle of respect for persons is the relationship that builds with participants. Ethical practice would suggest that these relationships be benign, nonmanipulative, and mutually beneficial. Such considerations would appropriately be discussed in the proposal's laying out of a plan for role, entry, participation, and ethics.

### ■ In-Depth Interviewing

Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing. Kvale (1996) describes qualitative interviews as "a construction site of knowledge" (p. 2), where two (or more) individuals discuss a "theme of mutual interest" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2). In any qualitative study, this method may be the overall strategy or only one of several methods employed. We live in a society where interviewing is ubiquitous; so we must distinguish the qualitative interview from a news article. But a journalistic or television talk show interview is

often brief, quick, and edited for audience appeal. In contrast, the qualitative research interview goes in depth and is using researchers' standards of quality (Wengraf, 2001).

Interviewing as a research strategy differs from interviews on a television talk show, or as part of a dating game, but all interviewing has some a priori structure and assumptions about the latitude the interview partner has in responding to questions or in creating them himself. The typical and historical stance is that the researcher has control over the interview questions, but researchers can be creative. Brown and Durrheim (2009) argue for "mobile interviewing"—that is, interviewing "while on the move (walking and/or driving)" (p. 911). These less structured and less formal venues disrupt deeply ingrained norms about "how to conduct an interview," "what the interviewer's role is," and "what the interviewee's role is."

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe researchers' stances toward the interview as those of a miner or traveler (pp. 47–50). The miner approach assumes that ideas and knowledge exist within the interview partner; the interviewer's responsibility is to "dig nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences" (p. 48), identifying the kernels or seams of priceless ore and mining them. The traveler is on a journey "to a distant country" (p. 48) with interview partners, either into "unknown terrain or with maps" (p. 48). The traveler is more intimately involved in coconstructing knowledge, whereas the miner tends to assume that his role is more distant and objective (see Table 6.1).

One of the most important aspects of the interviewer's approach is conveying the attitude that the participant's views are valuable and useful. The generativity of the interview depends on both partners and their willingness to engage in a deep discussion about the topic of interest. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note, "an interview is literally an *inter-view*, an interchange of views between two persons" (p. 2). However, the qualitative researcher should bring some skills and sensibilities to the interview. Preparation is crucial, as is anticipating how he may be received and what ethical issues may arise, as discussed in Chapter 3 and at the end of this chapter.

This engagement between the interviewer and interviewee can also be framed as a kind of relationship. Seidman (2013) discusses some do's and don'ts when developing this unique relationship. "Interviewers can try to craft relationships with their participants that are like islands of interchange separate from the world's definitions, classifications, and tensions. However, individual interviewing relationships exist in a social context" (p. 97). He advocates an approach that treats the thin line between being friendly and developing a friendship. In his words:

I try to strike a balance, saying enough about myself to be alive and responsive but little enough to preserve the autonomy of the participant's words and to keep the focus of attention on his or her experience rather than mine. (p. 98)

Seidman uses the words *respect*, *interest*, *attention*, and *good manners* to define his understanding of this relationship.

Researchers should set up a strategy to keep themselves disciplined about reflection on their data gathering. Figure 6.2 provides field notes from an interview conducted for a study of advisors' encounters with students of color in a community college. Note how this researcher reflects on details; these can be anything that might have interfered with the data quality or might be shading later interpretations.

Figure 6.2 Sample Interview Field Notes

Interview with DC October 15, 1997, 1:30–4:30 p.m. DC is an adviser with an academic department. The interview was set up by the dean.	What occurred and my handling of the interview
Setting: DC's office in the academic department. It's bright and lively—colorful tapestry on one wall, posters on the other walls. A giant poster about "I am okay." Books and papers are everywhere. On the corner of the desk are some wood games: tic-tac-toe, pyramid, and others.	
DC is a small, dark-skinned woman with her hair in small but longish braids all over her head. She wears glasses and a pinkish shade of lipstick that complements her coloring. She is lively, with a ready smile and a quick laugh. She comments on her height: "I'm smaller than any of my advisees, so I'm not a threat to anyone."	
I (KK) explain what I'm interested in and what my project is about. I tell her that I would like three things from her: One is an idea of what she as an adviser thinks are the attributes of a good teacher and what her students of color say, which teachers might possess those attributes, and which students I might talk to for the project.	DC listens very intently here.
DC: "OK. Good. Well, ask me a question." KK: "Tell me a little bit about what you do."	This is an awkward moment for me and for her. I wasn't sure what to do. This general question seems to surprise her. I may need to alter the questioning in future interviews.
DC: "I'm an adviser here. We get them in fresh off the street. I sit down with them and make out an educational plan. I like it when they know what's expected of them." DC: "The educational plan lists not only courses to be taken but clubs and other student activities. It lists the advising events the student will attend." DC returns. KK: "How many students do you have?" DC: "About 100."	She hands me a form that she has worked on with a student. Just then someone comes in and tells her she has an important phone call that they can't transfer. She leaves for about 10 minutes. I am able to look around.
KK: "100! Are you able to have a relationship with so many?" DC: "I feel I'm an advocate for students. I do whatever needs to be done to get them through this. I tell them not to overload, to relax about this . . . I think being honest with students is important. If I don't know, I tell them. But we can always look it up on the Net!"	I don't remember everything from her exact answer here. Something about keeping in touch. I need to be more scrupulous about taking notes so I don't make judgments with only sloppily recorded data.

Also crucial for a fruitful interview are the researcher's skills in asking follow-up, elaborating questions. We argue that the richness of an interview is heavily dependent on these follow-up questions (often called, quite infelicitously, "probes"). Rossman and Rallis (2012) discuss three main types: (1) open-ended elaborations, (2) open-ended clarifications, and (3) detailed elaborations (p. 184).

Patton (2002) categorizes interviews into three general types: (1) the informal, conversational interview; (2) the interview guide or topical approach; and (3) the standardized, open-ended interview (pp. 341–347). To these we would add the coconstructed, or dialogic, interview (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The informal, conversational interview takes place on-the-spot, as casual conversations are entered into with individuals and/or small groups; it is spontaneous and serendipitous. The interview guide is a bit more structured: The interview is scheduled, and the interviewer comes prepared with a list of topics or questions (which may or may not have been shared with the interview partner beforehand); this is the most typically used type of interview in qualitative studies.

Semistructured and standardized interviews are more carefully "scripted," asking specific questions in a specific sequence, sometimes without follow-up. This type of interview is often used in multisite case studies or with larger sample sizes. Finally, dialogic interviews may be scheduled, but both the interviewer and the interview partner generate new meaning together. Think of these types in terms of "talk time" (which is revealed, often quite dramatically, in transcripts): Informal and dialogic interviews show shared talk time; interviews that are topical or guided show more "talk" from the interview partner, as do standardized interviews.

With the more typical type—the topical or guided interview—the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects the way the participant frames and structures the responses. This method, in fact, is based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective). As noted previously, a degree of systematization—a tighter prefiguring with more structure—in questioning may be necessary, for example, in a multisite case study or when many participants are interviewed, or at the analysis and interpretation stage, when the researcher is testing findings in more focused and structured questioning. Semistructured interviewing allows a systematic and iterative gathering of data where questions are arranged in a protocol that evokes rich data but is also focused for efficient data analysis (Galletta, 2013).

Interviews have particular benefits. An interview yields data in quantity quickly. Immediate follow-up and clarification are possible. Combined with observation (looking, hearing, smelling, or touching), interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people. When more than one person participates (e.g., focus-group interviews, discussed below), the process takes in a wider variety of information than if there were fewer participants—the familiar trade-off between breadth and depth. When conducted by a person who has challenges with hearing, an interview can be accomplished through the use of a signing interpreter or by writing questions and responses—both of which allow for immediate and direct follow-up questions.

Interviewing has limitations, however. Interviews are often intimate encounters that depend on trust; building trust—albeit time bound—is important and a main feature of the

interviewer–interviewee relationship described above. In some cases, interview partners may be unwilling or uncomfortable sharing all that the interviewer hopes to explore. They may be unaware of recurring patterns in their lives. They may not be able to find the words that convey their thoughts. Furthermore, the interviewer may not ask questions that evoke long narratives from participants because of a lack of fluency in or familiarity with the local language or because of a lack of skill in expressing himself. By the same token, he may not be able to understand sensitively and to interpret responses to the questions or various elements of the conversation. And, at times, interview partners may have good reason not to be truthful (see Douglas, 1976, for a discussion of such instances).

Interviewers should have superb listening skills (or language skills, e.g., in local languages, symbols, abbreviations, or signs) and be skillful at personal interaction, question framing, and gentle probing for elaboration.

Volumes of data can be obtained through interviewing, but it is time-consuming to analyze them. Also worth considering is the issue of the quality of the data. When the researcher is using in-depth interviews as the sole way of gathering data, he should demonstrate in the conceptual framework of the proposal that the purpose of the study is to uncover and describe the participants' perspectives on events—that is, that the subjective view is what matters. He should use the continua in Table 6.1 in the proposal to describe the nature of research. For example, if his study is making more neutral and technical assumptions, he might triangulate interview data with data gathered through other methods. Finally, because interviews, at first glance, seem so much like natural conversations, researchers sometimes use them thoughtlessly, in an undertheorized manner, as if the interview partner is surely providing "an unproblematic window on psychological or social realities" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 1).

Mobile ethnography (Brown & Durrheim, 2009) entails conducting ethnographic research while following participants in their activities and, as such, is a novel approach to interviewing when a constantly changing, visually and aurally demanding environment makes a scheduled question-and-answer interview inappropriate or too formal for developing rapport. It allows free-association responses. This "bimbling" functions as "an active trigger to prompt knowledge recollection and production" (Anderson, 2004, p. 254). When the researcher is walking and conversation is somewhat haphazard, this will facilitate the production of authentic data.

This stretching of roles for the researcher makes him more fully a participant-observer and also explores the power relations in the research. In their study of professional identities, James and Busher (2006) used asynchronous e-mail interviewing to overcome the distance and time zone differences that made face-to-face or telephone interviews challenging. They could encourage participants to explore and revisit their insights and perceptions, and to move back and forth through their narratives. Through some of these alternative modes of gathering data, qualitative research allows inventive strategies.

This flexibility does not mean that the researcher goes into the interview without a set of general questions to guide it. Providing a preliminary set of interview topics or guides helps reassure the proposal reviewer that the researcher has direction and focus for the study. Moreover, research proposals should indicate what the researcher has learned through pilot studies and small-scale explorations, as well as other fully developed studies, all of which lead to reflection on and learning about the design, conduct, analysis, and representation of interviews.

Proposals may need revision if they stipulate relying on interviews but provide little evidence that the researcher has appropriate skills and experience with methods and has begun to develop the necessary sensitivities. Not everyone is automatically adept at such things. Roulston (2010) provides practical advice such as considering interviewees' time constraints and making plans for note taking or audio-recording, which can augment a proposal.

In addition to generic in-depth interviewing, there are several more specialized forms, including ethnographic interviewing, phenomenological interviewing, and focus-group interviewing, as well as life histories, narrative inquiry, and digital storytelling. Given the complexity of these methods, we recommend that researchers who are depending on these approaches review books devoted exclusively to them. There are also special considerations when interviewing specific populations, such as elites or children and youth, and when interviewing across social group identities. (Emergent strategies for interviewing that include the Internet and computer applications are discussed in Chapter 7.) We describe each of these below.

### Ethnographic Interviewing

Grounded in the genre of cognitive anthropology, ethnographic interviewing elicits the cognitive structures that reveal participants' worldviews. Described in the classic work of Spradley (1979) as "a particular kind of speech event" (p. 18), ethnographic questions are used by the researcher to gather cultural data. Ethnographic interviewing is an elaborate system of a series of interviews structured to elicit participants' cultural knowledge. Spradley identifies three main types of questions: descriptive, structural, and contrast. Descriptive questions are often quite broad, allowing the researcher to learn about the participants' views on "their experiences, their daily activities, and the objects and people in their lives" (Westby, Burda, & Mehta, 2003). Structural questions discover the basic ways the participants organize their cultural knowledge into categories that are important to them (rather than those important to the interviewer). The ones found to be most generative are "strict inclusion, rationale, and means-ends questions" (Westby et al., 2003). Strict inclusion questions put boundaries around salient categories of meaning; rationale questions focus on the participants' reasons for certain events or circumstances; and means-ends questions capture what leads to what, from the participants' perspectives. Finally, contrast questions provide the ethnographer with the meaning of various terms that elaborate what something is like and what it's not like.

The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture—broadly construed—from the participants' perspectives and through firsthand encounters. This approach is especially useful for eliciting participants' meanings for events and behaviors and for generating a typology of categories of meaning, highlighting the nuances of the culture. The method is flexible in formulating working hypotheses and avoids oversimplification in description and analysis because of its rich narrative descriptions. Spradley (1979) recommends a series of interviews, starting with one inviting the participant to describe her day, and then follow-up interviews asking contrast questions, such as, "How is one day good and another not?" and structure questions, such as, "In the general category of good day, what must happen, and what must not?" After identifying domains of culture, the next interview might ask listing questions, such as, "What are the kinds of things that people think of as 'doing good' in your neighborhood?"

There are shortcomings to this method, however. As with any method, the ethnographer can impose his values through the phrasing of questions or the interpretation of data. If the member of the cultural group chosen to participate does not represent that culture well, the subsequent analysis might be impoverished. The generativity of this method, as in all interviewing, depends highly on the researcher's interpersonal skills and patience.

### Phenomenological Interviewing

Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share.

As elaborated by Seidman (2006), three in-depth interviews compose phenomenological inquiry. The first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third joins these two narratives to describe the individual's essential experience with the phenomenon. Prior to interviewing, however, the researcher using this method may have written a full description of his own experience, thereby bracketing off his experiences from those of the interview partners. This phase of the inquiry is referred to as *epoché*. The purpose of this self-examination is to permit the researcher to gain clarity from his own preconceptions, and it is part of the "ongoing process rather than a single fixed event" (Patton, 1990, p. 408).

The next phase is called *phenomenological reduction*; here, the researcher identifies the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). The researcher then clusters the data around themes that describe the "textures of the experience" (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). The final stage, *structural synthesis*, involves the imaginative exploration of "all possible meanings and divergent perspectives" (p. 150) and culminates in a description of the essence of the phenomenon and its deep structure. The primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher's personal experience combined with those of the interview partners. It focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions. It is, however, quite labor-intensive and requires a reflexive stance on the part of the researcher. Phenomenological interviews have been quite successfully used in studies of teacher socialization (Maloy, Pine, & Seidman, 2002) and the challenges of identity development for refugees (Mosselson, 2010).

### Focus-Group Interviews

Interviewing participants in focus groups originated as marketing research but has been widely adapted to include social science and applied research. The groups are typically composed of 7 to 10 people (although groups range from as small as 4 persons to as large as 12 persons) who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study's questions. The interviewer/facilitator creates a supportive environment, asking focused questions to encourage discussion and

the expression of differing opinions and points of view. A research partner is essential for taking field notes on interactions and recording emotions, freeing the interviewer to ask questions, follow up, ensure that all participate, and intervene to facilitate the group. These focus-group interviews may be conducted several times with different individuals so the researcher can identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed, which are revealed through careful, systematic analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2008). As with many methods, focus-group discussions can be conducted on a dedicated Internet blog that, in effect, creates a “virtual” focus group, not limited by time or location, such that many participants from all over the world can join in.

This method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed: They do not form in a vacuum. People often listen to others’ opinions and understandings in forming their own. Often, the questions in a focus-group setting are deceptively simple; the trick is to promote the participants’ expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment.

One strength of focus-group interviews is that this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and often more relaxed than a one-to-one interview. When combined with participant observation, focus-group interviews can be especially useful for gaining access, focusing site selection and sampling, and even for checking tentative conclusions. As with other types of interviews, the format allows the facilitator the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arise in the discussion.

The results will be seen as having high face validity: Because the method is readily understood, the findings appear believable. Furthermore, the cost of focus-group interviews is relatively low, they provide quick results, and they can increase the sample size of qualitative studies by permitting more people to be interviewed at one time (Krueger & Casey, 2008). In action research and in program design and evaluation, focus groups are especially useful. They were effective tools, for example, in data gathering to design a program for working on the employment issues of persons with HIV/AIDS, based on their answers to questions about specific needs, such as stress and availability of health care to family, spirituality, and hopes for the future (O’Neill, Small, & Strachan, 1999).

Focus-group interviews have also been found to be especially useful for fostering social support networks. For their discussion of the benefits and challenges of focus-group interviewing strategies, Peek and Fothergill (2009) analyzed three distinct research projects: (1) a study of teachers, children, and parents in urban day care settings; (2) an examination of the responses of Muslim Americans (born in the United States of immigrant parents) to the events and aftermath of 9/11; and (3) a collaborative project on children and youth following Hurricane Katrina. In all three cases, the researchers found that focus-group interviewing eased access and, perhaps more important for the participants, fostered the development of social ties that superseded the research projects.

There are, however, certain challenges to this method as well. First and foremost is the issue of power dynamics in the focus-group setting. Should the researcher choose to use this method, he should be exquisitely aware of power dynamics and be able to facilitate well; these are crucial skills. In addition, the interviewer often has less control over a group interview than over an individual one. Time can be lost while irrelevant issues are discussed; the data are difficult to

analyze because context is essential to understanding the participants’ comments; the method requires the use of special room arrangements (or dedicated discussion sites) and highly trained facilitators. The groups can vary a great deal and can be hard to assemble, and logistical problems may arise from the need to manage a conversation while getting good-quality data.

We should also note that with relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use technology such as video recorders, focus-group discussions are increasingly videotaped. As with interaction analysis (see Chapter 7), using this technology creates a more-or-less “permanent record” of the data, which in turn facilitates analysis. Using video recorders (and any pictorial medium), however, raises important ethical issues about the protection of participants’ identities.

#### *Ethical Issues in Focus-Group Interviews*

As just noted, the primary ethical issues that may arise in conducting focus-group interviews center on the dynamics of power and influence that may play out in any group (whether physically together or on an Internet blog). The researcher must be exquisitely sensitive to these dynamics (e.g., “Is Robert dominating the discussion?”) and be skilled at facilitating the process. Should the discussion be videotaped, the privacy of individuals and protection of their identities become paramount. We are aware of institutional review boards that, quite appropriately, require additional statements on informed consent forms that specifically address using video clips or still photographs in any ensuing research reports. Their use can immediately identify participants and therefore requires a more complex statement about the use of the data to ensure that the participants are fully informed. In fact, we would argue that using photographs or video clips of individuals or groups abrogates the respect for persons’ consideration of anonymity. This is a thorny ethical issue that, in this digital age, will continue to be debated.

These issues, and others, arise in life history methodologies. This family of methods focuses explicitly on the stories individuals tell about their lives and includes narrative inquiry, digital storytelling, and the use of memoirs.

### ■ Life Histories, Narrative Inquiry, and Digital Storytelling

Life histories and narrative inquiry are in-depth interview methods that gather, analyze, and interpret the stories people tell about their lives. They have different research traditions, but they all begin with the assumption that people live “storied” lives and that telling and retelling one’s story helps one understand and create a sense of self. The story is important, but so is how the story is told (Riessman, 1991). The researcher, working closely with the participant, explores a story and records it. Life histories and narrative inquiry are used across the social science disciplines and are particularly useful for giving the reader an insider’s view of a culture or era in history; as such, they represent the application of the principles of biography to the social sciences. A related approach is digital storytelling, in which an individual (or possibly a group) tells a story using digital content—images, sound, and perhaps videos. Digital storytelling may or may not involve interviewing; we include it here because it fits well with the focus of life histories and narrative inquiry on narrating stories. Each is discussed below.

## Life Histories

Life histories seek to “examine and analyze the subjective experience of individuals and their constructions of the social world” (Jones, 1983, p. 147). They assume a complex interaction between the individual’s understanding of his world and that world itself. They are, therefore, uniquely suited to depicting and making theoretical sense of the socialization of a person into a cultural milieu (Dollard, 1935). Thus, one understands aspects of a culture through seeing how the culture has shaped the history of one person’s development or life within it, a history told in ways that capture the person’s feelings, views, and perspectives. The life history is often an account of how an individual enters a group and becomes socialized into it. That history includes learning to meet the normative expectations of that society by gender, social class, or age peers. Life histories emphasize the experience of the individual—how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals.

Life histories can focus on critical or fateful moments. Indecision, confusion, contradiction, and irony are captured as nuanced processes in a life (Sparks, 1994). These histories are particularly helpful in defining socialization and in studying aspects of acculturation and socialization in institutions and professions. Their value goes beyond providing specific information about events and customs of the past—as a historical account might—by showing how the individual creates meaning within the culture. Life histories are valuable in studying cultural changes that have occurred over time, in learning about cultural norms and transgressions of those norms, and in gaining an inside view of a culture. They also help capture the way cultural patterns evolve and are linked to the life of an individual. Often, this point of view is missing from standard ethnographies (Atkinson, 1998).

One strength of life history methodology is that because it pictures a substantial portion of a person’s life, the reader can enter into those experiences. Another is that it provides a fertile source of intriguing research questions that may be generative for focusing subsequent studies. And yet a third strength is that life histories depict actions and perspectives across a social group that may be analyzed for comparative study. This kind of research requires sensitivity, caring, and empathy by the researcher for the researched (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Life histories are often used in feminist research as a way of understanding, relatively free of androcentric bias, how women’s lives and careers evolve (Lawless, 1991). They are powerful for uncovering immigrant experiences and also for discovering how critical, dramatic events (e.g., floods, draft notices, pregnancy tests, losing a job, winning a scholarship, deportation) affect individuals within a culture. Sometimes they focus on a figure who defies or challenges his culture (e.g., Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr.) because their lives reveal cultural norms as they stand in opposition to them.

Jones (1983, pp. 153–154) offers five criteria for life histories. First, the individual should be viewed as a member of a culture; the life history “describe[s] and interpret[s] the actor’s account of his or her development in the common-sense world.” Second, the method should capture the significant role that others play in “transmitting socially defined stocks of knowledge.” Third, the assumptions of the cultural world under study should be described and analyzed as they are revealed in rules and codes for conduct as well as in myths and rituals. Fourth, life histories should focus on the experience of an individual over time so that the

“processual development of the person” can be captured. And fifth, the cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individual’s unfolding life story.

The major concerns with the life history are that it is difficult to demonstrate the transferability of one life to the larger cultural interpretations, sample sizes are by definition quite small, and there are few concepts to guide analysis. Once the researcher acknowledges the possible challenges with the method, however, he can address them, perhaps by supplementing in-depth interviews—“storying”—with other sources. For example, official records may provide corroborating information or may illuminate aspects of a culture absent from an individual’s account. In addition, the researcher might substantiate meanings presented in a history by interviewing others in a participant’s life. Before publishing *The Professional Thief*, for example, Sutherland and Conwell (1983) submitted the manuscript to four professional thieves and two police detectives to assess possible bias and to ensure that their interpretations resonated with the understandings of other professional thieves and those who come in contact with them.

A life history account can add depth and evocative illustration to any qualitative study. As with any qualitative genre, however, the abundance of data collected in a life history should be managed and reduced so that analytic headway can be made. Instead of using chronological order to present the story, the researcher might focus on (a) critical dimensions or aspects of the person’s life, (b) principal turning points and the life conditions between them, and (c) the person’s characteristic means of adaptation (Mandelbaum, 1973).

## Narrative Inquiry

Closely related to life history is narrative inquiry, an interdisciplinary method that views lives holistically and draws from traditions in literary theory, oral history, drama, psychology, folklore, and film philosophy (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The method assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories. The researcher explores a story told by a participant and records that story. Narrative inquiry can be applied to any spoken or written account—for example, to an in-depth interview. As noted on the homepage of the journal *Narrative Inquiry*, this method “give[s] contour to experience and life, conceptualize[s] and preserve[s] memories, or hand[s] down experience, tradition, and values to future generations” ([www.clarku.edu/faculty/mbamberg/narrativeINQ/](http://www.clarku.edu/faculty/mbamberg/narrativeINQ/)).

Narrative inquiry requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher: The inquiry should involve a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense and active listening and giving the narrator full voice. Because it is a collaboration, however, it permits both voices to be heard.

This method is criticized for its focus on the individual rather than the social context. Like life histories, however, narrative inquiry seeks to understand sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals’ lived experiences. Like any method that relies on participants’ accounts, narrative may suffer from recalling selectively, focusing on subsets of experience, filling in memory gaps through inference, and reinterpreting the past. There is a difference between life as told, and life as lived. Furthermore, narrative inquiry is also time-consuming and laborious, and requires some specialized training (Viney &

Bousefield, 1991). Several researchers have articulated criteria for good narrative inquiry (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Riessman, 1993).

Narrative inquiry is a relative newcomer to the social sciences and applied fields, but it has a long tradition in the humanities because of its power to elicit voice. Narrative inquiry values the signs, the symbols, and the expression of feelings in language and other symbol systems, validating how the narrator constructs meaning. It has been particularly useful in developing feminist and critical theory (Eisner, 1991; Grumet, 1988; Riessman, 1993). And it is especially effective when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Elliott, 2005) and when studying participants' experiences of violence, trauma, or genocide (Keats, 2009).

Narrative inquiry may rely on journal records, photographs, letters, autobiographical writing, e-mail messages, and other data. Typically, the field notes or interview transcriptions are shared with the narrator, and the written analysis may be constructed collaboratively. In the conduct of narrative inquiry, there is open recognition that the researcher is not just passively recording and reporting the narrator's reality. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) say, researchers need to "follow their nose and reconstruct their narrative of inquiry after the fact" (p. 7). This becomes, in effect, the recounting of methodology.

### Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is an approach to narrating stories that draws on the power of digitized images to support the content of the story. It has been developed to enable ordinary people to tell their stories. It thus has an empowering and/or emancipatory ideology, seeking to encourage people to give voice (and image and sound) to their life experiences. "Digital storytelling is fundamentally the application of technology to the age-old experience of sharing personal narratives. What's new is the growing availability of sophisticated tools" (Educause, 2007).

Supported by video-editing computer applications, such as iMovie (for Macs) or Movie Maker (for PCs), the storyteller first constructs a narrative (the story) by writing a script or outline, then enhances this with still images, video clips, sound clips, and the like. These digitized elements may come from the storyteller's own archives or could be taken from the Internet as publicly available. Blending the storyline with these other elements represents the craft and art of digital storytelling. Fundamental for such storytelling is first seeing a story, assembling it, and then sharing it. Lambert (2013) provides a step-by-step approach with plentiful illustrations.

Digital storytelling has been widely used in public health, international and community development projects, and educational settings. It has great appeal to young people who are very comfortable with software and willing to "hack around" to figure out how to create a compelling story. However, the open-ended nature of this highly creative process can be intimidating to some, and the costs of equipment may be prohibitive. Several universities and community-based organizations offer workshops on digital storytelling, creating a supportive group environment for experimentation and learning. The final product—the digital story—is often quite short, typically between 4 and 8 minutes long, with all the advantages of pictures and stories for enhancing attention to the report. As a data collection strategy, it could be considered a device or process that is one part of a final qualitative research report, or it could stand alone in such fields as communication and marketing.

### *Ethical Issues in Life Histories, Narrative Inquiry, and Digital Storytelling*

The ethical issues that may arise in life history research or narrative inquiry, as with many types of interviewing, center on the relationship with the participants. Especially when focusing on one individual, the researcher must be exquisitely sensitive to disclosing more about a person than that person is comfortable with. This demands a more collaborative approach to the research, as noted previously, where the participant and the researcher coconstruct the history or narrative. This stance will help avoid the ethical problems associated with revealing more than the participant cares to have revealed. A related ethical issue is the challenge to fully protect the individual's identity and facts of his private life. This is a delicate matter, one that should be fully addressed in the proposal. Quite often, seemingly neutral topics are, in actuality, quite sensitive and emotion laden, so the researcher must be prepared to make in-the-moment decisions about whether to continue that part of the interview.

Digital storytelling represents somewhat different ethical challenges, since the production of the story is under the control of the storyteller. The issues that may arise here center on unauthorized uploading of highly personal digital stories to the Internet. This is a challenge that anyone using this method should discuss in the proposal, laying out a procedure for managing decisions. Given the visual elements of such stories, and the scholar's power in shaping the story, ethical standards often require careful attention to possible harm and violations of confidentiality (Gubrium, Hill, & Flicker, 2014).

We now turn to a discussion of specific populations that the qualitative researcher might want to gather data from, or with: elites, children, and those with different social identities than those of the researcher.

### Interviewing Elites

Interviewing elites—individuals in positions of power and influence—has a long history in sociology and organizational studies. An interview with an "elite" person is a specialized case of interviewing that focuses on a particular type of interview partner. Elite individuals are considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well informed in an organization or community; they are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research and for their perspectives on, for example, an organization, a community, or specialized fields such as the economy or health policy. Citing the work of several organizational scholars, Delaney (2007) identifies various types of elites: philanthropic elites—often quite wealthy and known for major contributions or endowments to individuals, organizations, or causes; political elites—those elected or appointed to political office; ultra-elites—for example, Nobel Laureates or Olympic athletes; and organizational elites—CEOs or presidents of companies, for example. Elites have attained that status through extreme wealth and social responsibility (philanthropists); through success in attaining political office (politicians); through recognition of their scientific or scholarly accomplishments or extreme athletic achievements (awardees); or through rising to senior positions in organizations. One can well imagine other types, especially in political science.

Elite interviewing has many advantages. Valuable information can be gained from these participants because of the positions they hold in social, political, financial, or organizational

realms. Taking organizational elites as an example, these individuals can provide an overall view of a company or its relationship to other companies, albeit from their own experiences and standpoints. They may be quite familiar with legal and financial structures. Elites are also able to discuss an organization's policies, histories, and plans, again from a particular perspective, or have a broad view on the development of a policy field or social science discipline. Bennis and Nanus's (2003) study of 90 corporate executives is a strong example of the former; Stephens's (2007) study of macroeconomists and the changing conception of their field shows how elite and ultra-elite scholars understand their field. Many studies of political elites have been conducted. Other elites, such as religious leaders, could be generative participants, as could leaders of gangs or cults, union bosses, or tribal chiefs.

Elite interviewing also presents challenges. It is often difficult to gain access to elites because they are usually busy people operating under demanding time constraints; they are also often difficult to contact initially. We should note that this is also a consideration in other circumstances: busy school teachers, rural village women who have substantial work responsibilities, health care workers, and so on. With elite individuals particularly, the interviewer may have to rely on sponsorship, recommendations, and introductions for assistance in making appointments and getting around gatekeepers.

Another challenge in interviewing elites is that the interviewer may have to adapt the planned structure of the interview, based on the wishes and predilections of the person being interviewed. Although this is true with all in-depth interviewing, elite individuals who are used to being interviewed by the press and other media may well be quite sophisticated in managing the interview process. (Sophistication and political astuteness are not exclusively the domain of elites, and we do not mean to suggest that they are.) They may want an active interplay with the interviewer. Well practiced at meeting the public and being in control, an elite person may turn the interview around, thereby taking charge of it. When there are considerable (and obvious) status differentials between the interviewer and the elite interview partner, this may become more of an issue. As Delaney (2007) asks, under these circumstances, "who controls the interview?" She offers the principle from *jujitsu* of "using your opponent's momentum to your own advantage" (p. 215). Elites often respond well to inquiries about broad areas of content and to open-ended questions that allow them the freedom to use their knowledge and imagination.

Working with elites often places great demands on the ability of the interviewer to establish competence and credibility by displaying knowledge of the topic or, lacking such knowledge, by projecting an accurate conceptualization of the problem through thoughtful questioning. The interviewer's hard work usually pays off, however, in the quality of information obtained. Elites may contribute important insight about the topic of the study through their specific perspectives. On the other hand, elites (just like other interview partners) may well have only vague understandings of a setting that are limited by a narrow viewpoint.

Elites' power and the shifting power relations create difficult moments in interviewing. These challenges are multiplied when the cultural norms of the researcher are very different from those of the elites, as shown in the study by Figsenschou (2010), a young female from the West, when she sought data by interviewing Al Jazeera officials. The term *ultra-elite* might also be used, as in Zuckerman's (1977) study of Nobel Prize winners in economics and Stephens's (2007) study of renowned macroeconomists. Both Zuckerman and Stephens actually found

these ultra-elites willing to participate in 1- to 3-hour interviews, once they were assured of comfort (e.g., in their own offices or homes) and could establish rapport.

## Conducting Research With Children and Youth

Many of the materials available from publishers and on the Internet about interviewing and conducting research with children and youth are written for counselors, psychologists, police, health care workers, forensic experts, and lawyers. The issues covered include sexual abuse, parental abuse, custody issues, and the like. This is a very sad commentary on U.S. society today. However, our focus here is neither pathological nor legalistic; we are interested in those circumstances where the qualitative researcher may be interested in interviewing children and youth to learn about how they see some aspect of their worlds—a considerably more beneficent focus than those just described.

Thus, children or youth may be the primary focus of a study or one of many groups the researcher wants to interview or learn from more broadly. Increasingly, there are calls for including children's and youth's perspectives as relevant and insightful in learning more about aspects of their worlds. These arguments draw support from the "new sociology of childhood" (Ajodhia-Andrews & Berman, 2009, referencing Greene & Hill, 2005), which calls for "listening to the voices of children when conducting research about their lives" (Ajodhia-Andrews & Berman, 2009, p. 931). This is especially true in education, where all too often, those most affected by educational policy and programmatic decisions—the students—are absent from inquiry. There are special considerations, however, when the qualitative researcher proposes a study that involves children and other young people.

One such consideration might be the children or youth's dominant or preferred mode of communication. Children and youth who use sign language to communicate or whose medium of communication is pictures or music at times require specialized tools for communicating. In their study with "Ian," a child who communicates primarily through "physical movements, gestures, and vocalizations," Ajodhia-Andrews and Berman (2009, p. 933) found it generative to use tools with pictures to elicit Ian's perspectives on schooling. The demand here, whatever the circumstances, is that all attempts be made to respect the child or youth—through whatever media—to better understand her life world.

Also important are age considerations. Interviewing preschoolers, for example, is quite different from interviewing early adolescents. Young children are often active; early adolescents are frequently very self-conscious. Three-year-olds, exploring their emerging language skills, can drive one to distraction with their incessant questions (often quite sophisticated ones!), whereas early adolescents may be taciturn. It is unrealistic to expect young children to sit still for long, but joining them in some activity can create a climate for focused talk. One might use the projective technique of "play" with younger children, as is often done in psychotherapeutic settings. Once one views children as active agents continually constructing their own places in the world, interactive methods such as book discussions, art, child-led place tours, informal interviews, and puppets help children take the lead (Green, 2012; Phelan & Kinsella, 2013; Warin, 2011).

In contrast, some adolescents may feel more comfortable with their peers in a focus-group interview, whereas others may prefer the intimacy of one-to-one interviews. Decisions about

how to gather data with various age groups requires sensitivity to their needs, awareness of their developmental issues, and flexibility. Creating a natural context is crucial, but what constitutes “natural” will depend on the age of the participants.

Another consideration is that of role, with associated power dynamics. The roles an adult researcher assumes when studying children vary along two dimensions: “(1) the extent of positive contact between adult and child, and (2) the extent to which the adult has direct authority over the child” (Fine & Sandstrom, 1988, p. 14). Roles of supervisor, leader, observer, and friend can be appropriate. The role of friend is the most fruitful, because the researcher interacts with children in a way that creates trust and a nonauthoritative relationship. He should remember Lerum’s (2001) advice to “speak simply, dress casually, and profess emotional vulnerability” (p. 474) and to “continuously evaluate and construct the behaviour best suited for each person” (p. 475). However, age and power differences between adults and children are always salient.

#### *Ethical Issues in Interviewing Children and Youth*

The ethical issues in interviewing children and youth center on protecting them from harm as a result of participating in the study, protecting their identities and privacy, and being diligent to ensure that they are willingly participating in the study. The injunction of *primum non nocere*—first, do no harm—is especially important for the researcher to be scrupulous about. Children receive special consideration in the principles and practices for the protection of human subjects because of their relative vulnerability. Thus, the researcher proposing a study that involves children and youth must assure the reviewers of the proposal that he is exquisitely sensitive to the power dynamics between himself and the children, that he will make extra effort to protect the children from harm (physical or psychological), and that parents or guardians continuously support the children’s participation. Signing an informed consent form is necessary but not sufficient.

#### **Interviewing Across Differences in Social Identities**

Since the publication of the fifth edition of this book, much has been written about the complexities of conducting research across differences in social identities between researcher and participants. The research and theorizing about differences in race, ethnicity, first language, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and so on have taken up a central place in the qualitative inquiry discourse. A few stances have emerged. There are those who take the position, for example, that only women should interview women and men just won’t be effective. And there are others who argue that interviewing those with the same or similar social identities risks the researcher’s assuming too much tacit knowledge. And there are yet others for whom this issue is complex and nuanced, believing that taking a single position doesn’t contribute to thoughtful qualitative research. This latter position is the one we take.

That said, there are considerations at the proposal stage that should be addressed. A short discussion of some of the issues that might be encountered in the proposed research, depending on the research participants, will strengthen the reader’s view that the researcher is sensitive to and thoughtful about these issues. There are two circumstances to be particularly

aware of. When the researcher shares an aspect of social identity—gender, for example—with participants, he should be cautious about assuming that he understands the interview partner’s experience *just because he’s a man, too*. And he should guard against the interview partner’s making the same assumptions. Conversely, he should not avoid research sites or participants just because he does *not* share some aspect of social identity. Both of these positions are problematic.

As an example of a related issue, sharing professional identity, Rossman recalls interviewing teachers about a reform effort in their school and shared that she, too, had been a classroom teacher. In response to a question about everyday work in the school, one teacher responded, “Well, you know what it’s like. You’ve been here.” Rossman had to think quickly and followed up with, “Yes, but each school is different; so tell me about what it’s like here.” If she had not followed up, she would have been left with few data.

Two examples are particularly illustrative of these issues. Foster’s (1994) classic work explored issues of race, gender, geography, and age. She found that sharing the identity of being black Americans (her term) did not necessarily foster shared understandings. Gender, geography (living in the northern or southern United States), and age also shaped the ease—or difficulty—of conducting interviews with the participants. Thus, sharing one salient social identity—race—was not always sufficient for seamless interviews. The title of her chapter, “The Power to Know One Thing Is Never the Power to Know All Things,” captures the issue that differing social identities may complicate an interview, especially when the researcher assumes that sharing blackness, in this case, will be sufficient. Similarly, in a study focusing on women’s experiences of divorce, Riessman (1991) used long life-history interviews. While both the researchers and participants shared the gender identity of being women, they varied in terms of social class, first language, and place of origin. The interviews with middle-class white women, conducted by middle-class white women, went relatively smoothly, while the interviews with working-class Latina women did not. Riessman’s analysis focuses on the differing narrative styles that the women used in the interviews. The middle-class white researchers had difficulty understanding the narrative style of the Latinas, having assumed that gender would be enough. Recalling the discussion about queer theory, which articulates that identity is fluid, we cannot automatically assume we are “in” with a certain population. That two people drive the same type of car does not necessarily mean their experiences are the same or even somewhat similar!

Identity, feminist, and queer theory have emphasized the multiplicity of identities and how they interact and affect one another, challenging simplistic notions of shared identity categories. To plan for managing these nuances, in their proposals, researchers should state their own positionality and then demonstrate how they will reflexively monitor their approaches to entry, data collection, analysis, and interpretation, given the many differences between their own and their participants’ identities. Proposals that demonstrate how they will use guidance from previous researchers will be more impressive. For example, citing Ojeda, Flores, Meza, and Morales’s (2011) reflections on culturally competent protocols to integrate Latino cultural values or using the model and advice from research on South Asian people with asthma (Rooney et al., 2011), the proposer can write about planning to get past participants’ wariness of pharmaceutical trials, the label “asthmatic,” making information available in minority ethnic languages, and so on.

### *Ethical Issues in All Types of Interviewing*

Perhaps the most obvious fact about interviewing is that it is an intervention. As Patton (2002) notes, “a good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience, not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee” (p. 405). Thus, the ethical issues that may emerge in any interview center on the relationship between the researcher and the interview partner. Is that relationship nonmanipulative? Is there the potential for reciprocity? Is there the potential for pain and anguish when the person interviewed shares painful experiences? The ethical researcher will have to consider ways to manage such circumstances in his proposal. And, of course, the demand that the interview partner’s identity be protected throughout the study and in its writing up is crucially important, and dilemma laden, as illustrated in Chapter 3. We turn now to a discussion of using artifacts of culture—documents, objects, songs, pictures, pottery, student art projects, even trash—as an integral part of a typical qualitative research study. At the proposal stage, the writer will need to argue why and how inclusion of such materials will help participants respond to his research questions and, ultimately, enrich his analyses and interpretations.

## ■ Documents and Historical Analysis

The artifacts that individuals, organizations, families, agencies, townships, or larger social groups produce take multiple forms: Some are documents. Others are material objects that reveal something about a culture—pictures, clothing, pottery, trash. We discuss these in the next section. Documents, in particular, often are drawn on in a qualitative study. Various kinds of documents can provide background information that helps establish the rationale for selecting a particular site, program, or population; this is very relevant for the proposal. For example, the researcher may gather demographic data or describe geographic and historical particulars to justify selection of a site for the research. When he reviews old property transactions, skims recent newspaper editorials, or obtains information about an organization from a website, he is collecting data, but these data are used in the proposal to demonstrate that a particular site or setting will be generative. Websites are another source of data, when they are viewed as documents that convey messages about organizations.

A different use of documents may be proposed as part of the in-depth data gathering for a study. For example, records of meetings, transcriptions of court cases, or personal letters may be identified in the proposal as useful sources of data to be gathered. In addition, the researcher may propose that participants generate documents: perhaps new journal entries reflecting on daily experiences, or a collection of writing samples or art. Both uses of documents are valuable. In addition to documents, however, the researcher may propose to gather and learn about objects in the setting.

Researchers often supplement participant observation, interviewing, and observation with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of everyday events or constructed specifically for the research at hand. As such, the analysis of documents is potentially quite rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting. Minutes of meetings, logs, announcements, formal policy statements, letters, and so on are all useful in developing an understanding of the organization, setting, or group studied. Research journals and samples

of writing, as mentioned above, can also be quite informative. For her dissertation research in composition studies, Rosenberg (2006) used writing samples of newly literate adults to guide her interviews; this was particularly evocative of deeper insights into the challenges of literacy for adults, some of whom were becoming literate in a second or third language.

Archival data—documents recording official events—are the routinely gathered records of a society, community, or organization. These may further supplement other qualitative methods. For example, marital patterns among a group of Mexicans, discovered through fieldwork in a community, could be tested through marriage records found in the offices of the county seat or state capitol. Descriptions of funding priorities by policymakers could be corroborated (or not) through an analysis of budgetary allocations. Public health, legal, and police records can provide evidence of trends, for example, in domestic violence, and market receipts can provide useful insights to assess different populations’ spending on junk food. Now, governmental and nongovernmental agencies collect and store data that might even be coded and computer retrievable. Critical discourses analysis can usefully critique readily available governmental policy documents. For example, Brissett (2011) began with Jamaican education policy documents’ assertions of liberatory goals, then identified unintended consequences of perpetuating the disempowerment of low-income Jamaicans. His qualitative content analysis of policy documents, framed with postcolonial theory, revealed that institutionalized ways of thinking are reflected in both state policy rhetoric and practice.

As with other methodological decisions, the decision to propose gathering and analyzing documents or archival records should be linked to the research questions developed in the conceptual framework for the study. Furthermore, the analysis and interpretation of documents should be approached cautiously because the inferential span is long; that is, the meaning of the documents is never transparent. In the proposal, if arguing to gather and analyze documents, the researcher will want to indicate how he will seek corroboration of the meaning of the documents through other methods.

Often, case studies begin with a history—an account of some event or combination of events that occurred in the past—to provide background and context. Historical analysis is a method of analyzing and interpreting what has happened using records and accounts. It is particularly useful in qualitative studies for establishing a baseline or background prior to participant observation or interviewing. Sources of historical data are classified as either primary or secondary. Oral testimony of eyewitnesses, documents, records, and relics are primary. Reports of persons who relate the accounts of eyewitnesses and summaries, as in history books and encyclopedias, are secondary. For example, is the document written by a reporter who actually witnessed the faces of people fleeing from the collapsing World Trade Center? Or is it a collection of editorials written as commentary on the ramifications of the attack?

Historians’ usual questions should be asked: Who created the documents and for what purpose? How reliable are the data? Have meanings changed since they were produced? Are these primary sources, generated at the time of an event by a participant in the event? Or are they collections of commentary about an event?

Historical analysis is particularly useful in obtaining knowledge about unexamined areas and reexamining questions for which answers were not as definite as desired. It allows for systematic and direct classification of data. Historical research traditions articulate procedures to enhance the credibility of statements about the past, to establish relationships, and

to determine possible cause-and-effect relationships. Many research studies have a historical base or context; so systematic historical analysis enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of a study.

There is a dialectical tension in this kind of analysis between contemporary and historical interpretations of events, even though texts representing either perspective are influenced by the social contexts in which they are produced. Historical analysis cannot use direct observation, and there is no way to directly test a historical hypothesis. Moreover, there are challenges in analyzing and categorizing historical data. The research should keep in mind that documents may be falsified deliberately and that words and phrases used in old records may now have very different meanings. The meanings of artifacts, as we have noted before, are perceived and interpreted by the researcher. The researcher should retain a modest skepticism about such data.

Do you want to know about pediatric illness in Peru? A clinical staff might give you a sample of children's health records. Want to know if sons inherit more than daughters, or the arrest patterns for commercial sex workers? Want to see whether there is a connection between the locations of abandoned buildings and homicides? Key informants may tell you of information sources and how to make proper contact to gain access. Data can be accumulated, even from disorganized filing cabinets. "Almost every aspect of human behavior has been surveyed" (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 217); so an imaginative researcher can find appropriate data sets. He will find data from ministries of health, the World Health Organization, the Center for Disease Control, and a vast array of other data sets that can serve as background to set the stage for a case study or as secondary data sources. These are particularly useful when following the adage, "Collect locally and compare globally" (p. 220).

When the researcher uses documents, he may use content analysis. The raw material for content analysis is typically text: textbooks, novels, newspapers, e-mail messages, political speeches. Historically, content analysis was viewed as an objective and neutral way of generating a quantitative description of the content of various forms of communication; thus, counting the number of times specific words and terms appeared was central to the method (Berelson, 1952). As this process has evolved, however, researchers now focus on "the presence, meanings and relationships of . . . words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages" (Busch et al., 2005). Thus, today, the process is viewed more generously as a method for describing and interpreting the written productions of a society or social group.

## ■ Objects and Artifacts of Material Cultures

Probably the greatest advantage of using documents and other artifacts is that it does not disrupt ongoing events: These materials can be gathered without disturbing the setting. One can see patterns about cultural values by simply observing collections of art, scrapbooks, or photographs. The researcher determines where the emphasis lies after the data have been gathered, often for nonresearch purposes. A potential weakness, however, is the span of inferential reasoning. That is, the analysis of written materials or photographs or clothing, for example, entails interpretation by the researcher, just as in the analysis of interactively gathered data: Minutes of meetings do not speak for themselves. Care should be taken, therefore, in displaying the logic of interpretation used in inferring meaning from the artifacts.

Still, think about how easy it could be! Just collecting things people leave behind or throw out—this is what archaeologists do! An analysis of other artifacts—those not encoded in text—can be fruitful for a qualitative study. In fact, classic ethnographic research focused on many such artifacts: religious icons, clothing, housing forms, food, and so on.

The researcher may well determine that focusing on some artifacts in the setting would add richness to the corpus of data to be gathered. For example, O'Toole and Were (2008) found that examining space and material culture in their study of a technology company added greatly to their insights about "power, identity, and status" (p. 616). As a further example, studies in classrooms might include student artwork, wall decorations, or clothing, for example. Photographs (discussed more in Chapter 7) might also be included. These kinds of data can be gathered unobtrusively, often without having to negotiate permission and without worry about disturbing the setting, especially when the site has been abandoned. Of course, one must gather other data, to avoid jumping to quick but erroneous conclusions.

Unobtrusive data collection might be looking for accretion—that is, looking for what has been piling up—as when campers leave behind layers of coals with evidence of the meals cooked there. Also, unobtrusively gathered data may be evidence of erosion, such as the eroded and worn tiles in front of a particularly popular art exhibit. Use your imagination, but never rely solely on unobtrusively collected data. Silly mistakes could come from leaps of inference about the number of people wearing Nike sneakers or the number of gin bottles in the bins in one neighborhood.

## Ethical Issues in Using Documents and Artifacts

The ethical issues in relying on documents and artifacts center on how publically available these materials are. Using public materials might seem harmless, but the researcher should nonetheless consider how using them might harm the organization or individuals (even though not specifically identified). Would analysis and writing about these materials denigrate those who produced them? In what ways? Could the researcher be viewed as an artifact "turker"? A spy? While being creative, searching beyond the documents typically kept in libraries and archives, the researcher's attention to documents could blossom into renewed and wider attention to matters that had been buried or laid to rest.

More private materials should be subjected to even closer ethical reasoning. Even if a research participant agrees to write a journal (for research purposes), what if he discloses troublesome information? What if there are embedded pleas for help? Revelations of criminal behavior? How should the researcher respond? The overall consideration here is for the researcher to ask, "Are the producers of these artifacts likely to feel exposed or that their privacy has been violated if these materials are used?" So seemingly unobtrusive data collection can bring up thorny ethical and role issues.

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Some combination of these primary research methods is typical for in-depth qualitative inquiry. In Vignette 20, Shaddock-Hernandez (1997) articulates a complex design that incorporates several. The vignette is adapted from her proposal for research about CIRCLE (Center for Immigrant and Refugee Leadership and Empowerment), a participatory project involving newcomer undergraduate students, graduate students, and members from refugee and immigrant communities.

### Vignette 20 Using Multiple Methods for Data Collection

Imagine 12 university students, on a chilly Saturday morning, sprawled out on a classroom floor formulating their thoughts for a proposal on scattered sheets of newsprint. Laughter, silence, and intense discussion highlight the writing process of these authors, who are first-generation refugee and immigrant (newcomer) students from China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Korea participating in an undergraduate seminar on cross-cultural experiences in community development.

This dissertation research acknowledges the real tensions that exist in any qualitative research endeavor. Certain models can be rigid, one-way streets if they seduce participants into a process of inquiry in which the researcher alone is the analyzer and interpreter of data. This study consciously tried to counter such situations by applying participatory research as the guide of the inquiry (Maguire, 2000; Reardon, Welsh, Kreiswirth, & Forester, 1993). Study participants have been involved in this inquiry as researchers and valued members of a learning team to produce knowledge that may help stimulate social change.

Stemming from my commitment to participatory processes, the research I am conducting is collaborative in nature, emerging from the students and the communities I work with. Collaboration and participation in developing critical learning environments produce pooled resources and shared expertise leading to integrated and collective activities. Collaboration, action, and reflection enhance the legitimacy of each participant's knowledge (Brice Heath & McLaughlin, 1993) and set the stage for the sources of multilevel data collection employed in this study. These six sources of data have evolved as a complement to the development of CIRCLE courses and community outreach activities and support the concept of a pedagogy for affirmation, advocacy, and action. They include the following: (a) journal entries and self-reflection papers; (b) focus-group interviews with 8 undergraduate students; (c) in-depth interviews with 10 students; (d) video and photography documentation; (e) oral history interviews conducted by students and youth with each other; and (f) research field notes, reflections, and academic papers for courses and conferences over the 4 years of my involvement with and participation in the project. These latter data provide critical insights into my own theoretical development in relation to this research and my role as researcher in this study.

Note the discussion of the various sources of qualitative data—some generated as part of the CIRCLE project, others to be generated specifically for the dissertation. It is eloquently congruent with her assumptions about the nature of this work, its purpose and audience, and her political stance. Note that she plans to rely on several methods: documents in the form of journals, self-reflective writing, and papers written for courses or conferences (both her own and those of the student participants); a focus-group interview; in-depth interviews; and video and photography. (Videotaping and photography are discussed in Chapter 7 as specialized methods, although one could base an entire study on videos and pictures.)

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This chapter has provided an overview of several basic methods for data collection that qualitative researchers typically use, as well as salient ethical issues that may arise with the various methods. At the proposal stage, the writer should consider how the selection of any

particular method will inform the research questions, thereby extending and deepening knowledge on the topic. As a guide for assessing which of the basic methods will be useful, Tables 6.3 and 6.4 offer judgments about each method's strengths and challenges.

Table 6.3 Strengths of Basic Data Collection Methods

Strengths	PO	O	I	FG	MC	NI
Fosters face-to-face interactions with participants	X		X	X		X
Useful for uncovering participants' perspectives	X		X			X
Data collected in a natural setting	X	X	X	X	X	X
Facilitates immediate follow-up for clarification	X		X	X		X
Valuable for documenting major events, crises, conflicts	X	X		X	X	X
Useful for learning about participants' unconscious thoughts	X				D	D
Useful for describing complex interactions	X	X	X	X		X
Useful for obtaining data on nonverbal behavior and communication	X	X	D	D		D
Facilitates discovery of nuances in culture	X	X	X	X	X	X
Provides for flexibility in formulating working hypotheses	X	X	X	X	D	X
Provides information on context	X	X	X	X	X	
Facilitates analysis, validity checks, and triangulation	X	X	X	X	X	
Encourages cooperation and collaboration	X	D	D	X		X
Data are easy to work with and categorize for analysis					X	
Obtains large amounts of data quickly		X		X		
Allows wide ranges of types of data and participants	X			D	D	
Easy and efficient to administer and manage					X	
Easily quantifiable and amenable to statistical analysis					X	
Easy to establish generalizability or usefulness for other settings					D	
May draw on established instruments					X	
Expands access to distant participants					X	

NOTE: X = Strength exists; D = Depends on use; PO = Participant observation; O = Observation; I = Interview; FG = Focus-group interview; MC = Material culture, surveys, documents; NI = Narrative inquiry.

Table 6.4 Challenges in Using Basic Data Collection Methods

Challenges	PO	O	I	FG	MC	NI
Leads researcher to fixate on details	X	X		D	X	X
Possible misinterpretations due to cultural differences	X	X	X	X	X	X
Requires technical training		D				
Depends on cooperation of key individuals	X		X			X
Readily open to ethical dilemmas	X	X	X			X
Difficult to replicate	X	X	X	X	X	X
Data more affected by researcher presence	X	X	X	X		D
Expensive materials and equipment	D	D	D			
Can cause discomfort or even danger to researcher	X					
Too dependent on participant openness/honesty	X		X			X
Too artistic an interpretation undermines the research	X	X	X	X		X
Depends on power of initial research questions		X		X	D	
Depends on researcher's interpersonal skills	X	X	X	X	X	X

NOTE: X = Challenges exists; D = Depends on use; PO = Participant observation; O = Observation; I = Interview; FG = Focus-group interview; MC = Material culture, including documents; NI = Narrative inquiry.

A solid rationale for the choice of methods is crucial, as it indicates to the reviewer of the proposal that the choice of methods is grounded in the conceptual framework and builds on previous theoretical, empirical, and methodological knowledge. These same considerations apply for the somewhat more focused methods discussed in Chapter 7.

### Dialogue Between Authors

“Catherine: Most people, me included, naturally love the social aspects of collecting interview data. But we so often forget the fun of discovering rich sources from census or other survey data, or freely available website data. I love focus-group data collection, but it sure is hard to manage the logistics. I've loved the challenge of elite interviews when I do research in state capitals. I am intrigued with ethnographic interviewing, but when I see what it is like when done right, it seems really complex! I've analyzed state codes of law, as in document analysis, and that was an especially dry and boring topic, but I'm starting a new project that is document analysis of presidential speeches and campaign platforms. What are your favorites?”

Gretchen: I am becoming increasingly intrigued with what some call “alternatives” to the standard interviews, observations, and document reviews. Videos, pictures, and photo elicitation methods—several of my students have used these recently—are just fascinating for what they evoke. Reminds me of years ago when a group of us were trying to make the AERA annual meetings more lively. Skits, performance theatre all began to become more visible. I don't see so much of that now—maybe these will come back.”

### Dialogue Between Learners

“Dear Karla,

I know I'm starting my thinking about data collection methods from the starting point of what data are easily accessed, and then thinking, “Okay, what else do I need and how do I get it?” How did you start?

Keren

Hi, Keren,

The question that I always have around data collection methods is: How do you know how many methods you need for your research design? I guess it depends on the assumptions that are outlined early on in this chapter. As I've mentioned, for my own research, I used participant observation, semistructured interviews/focus groups, and document review as my primary methods. They seemed to complement each other nicely once I was in the fieldwork process. So interesting, though, how many different approaches and techniques there are!

As always, I look forward to your thoughts.

Karla

### FURTHER READING

#### Observation and Participant Observation

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