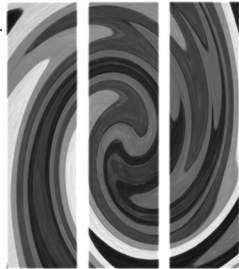


CHAPTER 3



The Research Experience

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will

1. Understand the basic issues involved in developing a research project from initial ideas to data analysis and writing
2. Understand some of the challenges student researchers face
3. Learn some effective strategies for organizing and writing a dissertation
4. Recognize the role of Institutional Review Boards in approving and monitoring university-affiliated research

“Don’t touch the hot stove!” “Eat your food with a fork!” “Wash your hands before you eat.” “Don’t tease your brother.” Most of us remember being told these things by our parents. Sometimes we boldly asked “Why?” and were told, “Because I told you so!” or “Because it’s good for you, trust me.” This process of learning does not change significantly as we grow older. We continue to ask questions, but we are not always told, or fully understand, why a certain approach is more fruitful or less painful than others; we sort of take it for granted and trust the expertise of others. However, this type of learning has to be balanced against direct experience and individual creativity. It is true that you should avoid being burnt by the hot stove, but you might be able devise a way to safely handle the heat—that is to say, to balance your individual interest with conventional mandates.

This is the objective of this book. In discussing the specifics of doing qualitative research, we hope to offer you strategies for both satisfying personal interests and meeting certain requirements within the field. To start with, we can assume that by picking up this book and reading through the pages, you are showing willingness to submit yourself to a learning process where you receive advice on how qualitative research is done. However, it is unlikely that you will find an exact, ideal formula for doing your research in this or any other textbook because, as you will note throughout this book, qualitative research is a growing and diverse field. This reminder about the vast and flexible terrain of qualitative research may be simultaneously exciting and daunting to novice researchers. The examples and stories presented in this chapter are intended to both reduce your anxiety and raise your enthusiasm about the field.

Learning From Others' Experiences

Switch on your television and flip through the channels. You will undoubtedly come across a talk show in which people are talking about their rise and fall from grace. Or maybe you will find a sports channel where, more often than not, instead of a game, you will see interviews with players about their hopes and feelings. We live in a world in which our yearning for people's "experiences" is more than satisfied by the popular media. Indeed, sometimes the "personal" is unduly praised as a privileged source of knowledge (see Atkinson & Silverman, 1997).

However, this is not always the case. Any book which sets out to offer information and advice about doing a piece of research without telling a few personal stories would be in danger of being received as empty and unhelpful. If we can draw out appropriate implications from these stories, moving from the personal to the practical, then we will have achieved something more substantial than merely providing some kind of experiential comfort blanket.

In this spirit, this chapter is devoted to the stories of doctoral students, who, like you, had to navigate their way through the labyrinth of qualitative research. These stories are organized in a chronological sequence that starts with selecting a research topic and ends with analysis and writing. You should note that in reality the steps presented here might overlap (e.g., you might choose a dissertation chair before you choose a research topic). Also, the sequence is not always linear. Things do not always progress as expected. For example, after selecting a topic, such as mental illness, you might realize that you cannot find any participants for your study and might have to change your topic. The steps outlined here constitute the essential components of a qualitative study. Although more can be added and some steps may be reversed or repeated, the basics do not change dramatically from one project to another.

The discussion that follows is based on the generous contributions of 12 colleagues who, in response to a list of questions, shared their experiences with us. Collectively, these stories represent an opportunity to learn about the theory and practice of qualitative research. These stories may be read and used in different ways. Some can be (a) *imitated*, especially if the research strategies were successful, whereas others can help you (b) *avoid* similar mistakes in cases where strategies did not work well. Still others might simply (c) *inspire* you to move in innovative directions. Finally, collectively, the stories provide a practical (d) *list* of the steps involved in the research process from start to finish based on the experiences of recent PhDs.

SELECTING A TOPIC

In this section, we discuss some common pathways to choosing topics for qualitative researchers. As you read these stories, note that in many cases researchers come across a topic by chance, or they begin studying a topic because the data or the research site were conveniently available.

Social Obligations

For some graduate students, selecting a topic derives from a sense of social obligation. For example, Karyn McKinney's research on how white college students construct their racial identity was motivated by her desire to expose the system of racial hierarchy in the United States. In a sense, she was morally driven to select this topic, or as she puts it, "I was interested in the topic out of thinking about what *I should do* to effectively change the status quo." Karyn was committed to studying race relations, and settling on a specific area within that field was a fortunate coincidence. In her words,

Eventually, my real excitement about *data* was what decided me on my topic. I was teaching a class in race and ethnicity, and had asked students, as their main project for the class, to write what I referred to as a "racial/ethnic autobiography." In my assignment for the course, students were to go chronologically through their lives, telling their stories, focusing on situations and incidents that made them more aware of their own or other people's race or ethnicity. Basically, these papers would be first-person analyses of the development of racial and/or ethnic identity. When I got the students' papers back, I was mesmerized by reading them. I literally could not put them down. All of the students told stories that showed

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how racial and ethnic identity is a process, not a static characteristic. They were fascinating, to me at least. Most of my students were white, and I began to think about the new area I'd been reading in, "whiteness studies."

Karyn's research agenda was not entirely planned in advance. She was simply assigning a project for a course and happened to realize the importance of the data that was pouring in—the data "mesmerized" her. Note her social obligations did not dictate her research entirely. To a large extent it was her fascination with the data that focused her interests.

Curiosity

Other researchers cite general curiosity as the main reason for selecting a particular topic. Essentially, they are intrigued by a facet of social life and want to learn more about it. Michelle Miller-Day's story is illustrative of this approach:

There is a quote from Zora Neale Hurston that, for me, captures what I hope to achieve with qualitative research. She said, Research is formalized curiosity.

It is poking and prying with purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the secrets of the world and they that dwell therein.

I have always been curious. Choosing a career as a social science researcher, I assumed I could make a living asking questions and seeking answers. (In my more noble moments) I also believed that this career would enable me to make real contributions to the understanding of social behavior and the human experience.

In Michelle's story, social obligations are not necessarily at the forefront of her work. A general sense of curiosity coupled with the "noble" desire to understand others dictated her research choices. This sense of wonder about the world guided her questions and her observations.

Being Assigned to a Research Grant

A number of the colleagues we contacted selected their research topics based on the fact that they were assigned to work on a research grant that fortuitously provided them with a topic and access to respondents. For example, Greg Boylstein writes,

I accepted a job as a research assistant (RA) at the local Veterans Administration Medical Center. Initially I did home interviews with veterans

who recently had a stroke. Through time I became more intimately involved in the project, helping construct the initial theoretical framework with the principal investigator and my dissertation chair, who was a consultant on the study. Since I was a member of the research team on this large project, it became natural for me to use the first phase of data as a basis for my dissertation research. I did not have any particular interest or knowledge in stroke recovery prior to this RA position. . . . Rather than being isolated in my dissertation research, I actually became integrated into a large investigative center focused on stroke rehabilitation, with my dissertation making up one component of disseminating our initial findings.

For other researchers who received less restrictive, individual grants, the funding simply provided them with the time and resources to pursue topics of personal interest. Consider, for example, Nikitah Imani's case:

I actually did not per se select my topic for the dissertation. I received a grant from the National Science Foundation to participate in a summer qualitative methods workshop. Part of the responsibilities associated with successful completion of that workshop was the completion of a qualitative research project. . . . We were given the run of the local social theater to choose as sites and given the convenience of the university setting itself and some issues it resolved in advance (like securing primary access). I became engaged by a grant-funded psychotherapy program the university was running. It targeted presumably "dysfunctional" African American families. Initially, without a topic, I sought merely to use ethnographic tools to describe to those external to the program what was "taking place." It was not long after embarking on this quest that my pursuits turned far away from merely "test-driving" the methodology to looking at critical questions of how "dysfunctionality," which I had taken for granted in the programmatic definitions, was being articulated, defined, redefined, and reified in the implementation phase. So it would be fair to say that the "scene" and the associated circumstances gave me my topic, which, given the methodology I had chosen, seemed an appropriate line of inquiry to follow.

As we can see in Nikitah's example, selecting a research topic is often a complex process where personal interests, financial resources, and access to data converge to shape the ideal research question.

Using the Self as a Starting Point

For some, direct personal experience becomes the starting point of their research. In Amir's case, being an immigrant led him to look at homeless people.

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In some ways, homelessness for him became a metaphor for the immigration experience and the struggle for belonging. Similarly, Michael Arter speaks of how being an undercover police officer became an impetus for his study of policing:

I returned to graduate school after many years in the military and law enforcement. As I became acclimated to the academic setting and my background became known to the faculty and other students, I noticed there was a lot of emphasis placed upon and interest in my time spent as an undercover officer. Along with much misinformation that was held by many regarding such assignments, there was an unspoken mystique and subtle respect that was accorded to me for the work I had done. I realized at that time that most individuals lacked actual knowledge about such assignments and relied on media presentations and sensationalized examples for their understanding about the undercover function. At the same time, I was very aware of the impact undercover assignments had in my life and the lives of others with whom I had worked. While considering a topic for a research methods class, I conducted a literature search to assess research available relating to stress in policing and discovered there was a distinct gap in this body of literature. I decided to adopt this topic for the research class and, as I began to research the available literature, I became more entrenched in this topic as a viable venue for my dissertation.

The factors listed here, like those that will follow, often coexist and overlap in the same project. What is noteworthy here is not the distinct pattern that a particular researcher follows, but the fact that the process as a whole—that is, the practice of qualitative research—does not follow an exact uniformed model. Essentially, the lesson with selecting a topic is to always keep an eye out for a good topic, take advantage of opportunities when they present themselves, and be flexible.

SELECTING A METHODOLOGY

An obvious question for this book would be why do some students choose qualitative research? In the United States, quantitative research tends to be more prevalent. In most sociology departments, the majority of the faculty use quantitative methods in their research, and most journals publish a disproportionate number of quantitative journals. The so-called norm, at least for now, is quantitative. What then attracts some to qualitative research? Here are some answers directly from the researchers.

Because the Other Approach Is Limited

Although there is a general sense among some researchers that qualitative data is inherently more “interesting” than numbers, there are less aesthetically oriented and more analytically astute reasons for choosing qualitative methods. For example, Karyn McKinney suggests that qualitative research was a better fit for the types of questions she was asking:

I’ve always found qualitative data more interesting than quantitative data. Beyond that, I believe that qualitative data is often more suited to provide me with the answers to questions I’m interested in. I find that my interests usually lie in “how” questions rather than in “how many” questions.

In her dissertation, Karyn was interested in *how* whiteness is created and sustained in everyday life. The question of how many whites live in the United States or how much money whites make compared to other groups could have easily been answered using the census data.

Similarly, Sara Crawley states that in her research on lesbian identities, quantitative measures seemed inadequate:

My substantive interests were related to identity and sexuality. The notion that anyone could describe such intimate matters with a “6” or some quantitative measure seemed atheoretical and, frankly, ludicrous. I am not suggesting that nothing is measurable or that attempts to measure are less useful for some topics. But with a topic that is so intimate and constantly forming as sexuality and identity, it seemed extremely important to highlight individual narrators’ ideas and concepts with some detail. As it turns out, I became very interested in talk and how people narrate their identities and realities. The good stuff was in their descriptions and ideas. It fascinated me every day.

A related limitation of quantitative research is highlighted in Michelle Miller-Day’s story about realizing that the subjects had all but disappeared in her survey research:

Like many students, I began my graduate training being socialized within a positivist paradigm. I was learning my statistics and how to conduct surveys and develop quasi-experimental designs. But, one day I experienced a transforming moment in graduate school. Donna, one of the participants in a survey-based study I conducted, was reading a manuscript I had written reporting the findings of this study when she exclaimed, “Where is the depth? Where is the feeling? Where am *I* in all of these words?”

“Well,” I responded, “right there on Page 17!”

“I know that I’m the *subject*,” Donna went on, “and I know that you are *the researcher*. But . . . uhmmm . . . I really don’t get a sense of either one of us in the paper.”

She was absolutely right! Donna, along with the other participants, provided a unique voice during the collection of the data, yet that voice was ultimately muted by the deadening *thud* of an aggregate statistic. In my research report she was nowhere to be found.

This experience occurred only a few months before I took my first qualitative research methods course. In that course I found my home. While my education to that point was focused on teaching me to collect information and understand social behavior, I wasn’t getting at the *understanding human experience* part of my aspiration. I realized that to truly capture experience, I needed to embrace the subjective and, along with it, the humanity of social science.

Michelle’s emphasis on voice and subjectivity shows how an interest in subjectivity and the authenticity of human experience is a strong feature of qualitative research. As we discussed in Chapter 2, this is one of the dominant paradigms within qualitative research.

Doing What We Already Like

For Sylvia Ansay and her dissertation on house arrest, doing qualitative research was not an epiphanic shift in her thinking, but rather a natural extension of what she “already liked doing”:

As a former elementary teacher and Guardian ad Litem [a volunteer worker who functions as an advocate for abused children in the U.S. courts], I have years of experience listening to stories in context and analyzing situations and needs. For me, qualitative research merely formalized what I already did well and what I loved doing. Having chosen the dissertation topic based on a close friend’s experience, I was already aware of the storied nature of his accounts, how his personality, alcoholism and his ongoing feud with a local underground were all part of the story of his house arrest as well as his criminal offense. I knew that his circumstances, such as being a small-business owner, gave him privileges that someone unemployed or on an 8-to-5 schedule wouldn’t have. I had heard his descriptions of good officers and “pricks.” Everyday life on house arrest was a story within stories, and I felt that perspective was necessary for understanding the *whys* and *hows* of the intensive supervision experience.

Bridging the Social Distance

Yet another colleague, John Talmage, found qualitative methodology to be an ideal way for bridging “the social distance” in his study of “the social world” of the homeless:

While survey research is clearly an appropriate methodology for many research questions, I did not believe that it covered the depth of meaning that seemed to be so important in understanding the social world. I did a qualitative dissertation to understand the social world from the perspective of the homeless population, and to that end it seemed helpful to get closer to the data. This I eventually did by spending time with the homeless in public places, in their hobo camps and cat holes, in shelters, and in meetings with my “research team” [a group of homeless research informants]. These were ways to reduce the social distance between myself and those homeless persons with whom I worked and spoke.

Here we can see that John relies on ethnographic methods as a way of bridging the status gap between him and a marginal impoverished population.

Doing What Is Practical

Finally, sometimes qualitative research is just a good fit for the question. As Darin Weinberg states, there is nothing inherently superior about qualitative research and its practitioners. Selecting qualitative methodology could be mostly a practical matter of deciding what works best. In Darin’s words,

I would say my choice to do a qualitative dissertation was a product of both personal taste and a sense that the themes in which I was interested could be best explored through qualitative approaches. I was never committed to keeping the study strictly qualitative. As it turned out, my use of quantitative data was fairly minimal but this was more a product of contingency and how the foci of the project evolved than it was one of a priori commitments. Had I come across quantitative materials that could have helped me flesh out my analysis, I would have had no hesitation to use them.

These stories reiterate the points made in Chapter 2 about the diversity of qualitative research. Qualitative research is more than one thing. The features that attract researchers to this methodology are many, and so are the ways this methodology is practiced.

SELECTING A CHAIR

Aside from choosing the topic and the methodology, another important step in doing qualitative research as a doctoral student is selecting a committee chair. In U.S. universities, a committee is a group of faculty who supervise a dissertation. They are composed of five members, four from the PhD candidate's specific department and one outside member from another program. The most influential member of the committee is the chair. This person is expected to have more direct contact with the student than the other members. In fact, it is often the case that the other four committee members are implicitly or explicitly picked by the committee chair.

PhD students typically follow the research agenda of their chair and rely on his or her mentorship for the remainder of their academic careers. Thus selecting a chair could be one of the most important decisions a doctoral student makes. Although committee chairs can be changed, the practice is generally frowned on and could be read as lack of commitment or effort on the part of the student. So it is best to choose carefully and get it right the first time, as it were. Here are some suggestions from our colleagues about selecting a chair.

Reputation and Interest

A safe and easy way to choose a dissertation committee chair is work with someone with an extensive academic record and distinct reputation, particularly if you find their work interesting. This was the case for Karyn McKinney, who states,

I had been attending another university, where I got my master's degree. In the process of working on my thesis, I came across the work of my chair. It was unlike anything I had previously read, and I was very excited about his approach. I checked to see what university he was affiliated with, and then applied to the University of Florida for my doctoral studies. After I was accepted, I entered the program and immediately sought him out, and asked him to work with me.

Similarly, Eileen O'Brien writes,

My qualitative methods professor at my MA program referred me to an *American Sociological Review* article she had recently read and suggested I might be interested in his work. I made a point to meet the author at my first American Sociological Association meeting I attended, told him I wanted to work with him, and then went about the process of moving/transferring to the school where he was.

Along with reputation, it is important to pick a chair whose work intrigues you. As Sylvia Ansay writes,

I chose the professor whose own research and coursework excited me, someone whose seminar assignments included meaningful projects, someone who looked at my seminar papers and saw numerous possibilities for further research and publication. Research takes passion. I recognized in him the passion I needed to help me through the entire PhD process.

Rapport

Of course, reputation is not always the key criterion for this decision. Sometimes, picking a chair is a matter of finding someone you can have a good working relationship with, as in the case of Michelle Miller-Day, who states,

I wish I could say that the selection of my committee members was a thoughtfully considered endeavor based on the best faculty member for the job. But I cannot. I knew who I wanted to be the chair of my committee because he and I had worked together in the past on a funded research project and I liked him, I respected him, and I knew we worked well together.

The importance of good rapport is further highlighted by Nikitah Imani in the following passage:

I had had a negative experience as a political science major with one member of my committee, which led to me discontinuing my graduate studies in that department after completing a master's degree. That experience taught me to make sure that the members of the committee, not least of them the chairperson, would be sympathetic to me as a human being, first, and then to my research agenda.

It is obvious that selecting a reputable chair you have difficulty communicating and working with will do little to advance your career. Most of our colleagues recommend that students research the "temperament" of their candidate for a chair before finalizing their decision.

Politics

Academic institutions are not immune from politics and power games. Some faculty members, be it because of their research or personal characteristics, are

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more capable of supporting their students than others, particularly when the student's work is controversial and challenges mainstream views about a topic. As Nikitah Imani puts it,

The chair's power and influence in the department was an important consideration for me. I watched a fellow student in the political science department who enrolled with an Ivy League honors masters and did not finish his dissertation. I watched a second similarly go down in flames, and the critical variable seemed to be an insufficient amount of influence on their behalf, particularly within their committees. As a graduate research professor, my chair not only was a full professor, but to a certain extent he was immune from the predilections of the department itself. He ranked sufficiently high within the department to have weight in decision making, but was not connected in many ways to the rivalries and histories of the long-term faculty.

Unfortunately, as Nikitah notes, sometimes graduate students become entangled in political struggles within their program and are directly or indirectly kept from completing their degree. Here is when a "powerful" chair can play a significant role in protecting the student from vicious, personal attacks. More important, a good chair (if you are willing to listen to him or her) can keep you from getting involved in certain issues in the first place. The thing to remember is that as a graduate student, your position in your department is temporary. Your goal is to get your degree and move on to a full-time position. In contrast, the faculty have long-term vested interests in the program. There are issues among them that preexisted before your arrival and will likely continue after you graduate. Do not inadvertently become fodder in fights that essentially have little to do with your academic success. By picking a chair who is immune from the petty in-fights, you simply increase your chances of completing your degree in a timely manner. That is why in many programs junior, untenured faculty are not permitted to serve as dissertation chairs. This is not entirely about qualifications. The fact is, disputes will come up and someone has to defend your side. A junior faculty, who is in the midst of the tenure approval process, is rarely capable of defending you.

Interviewing a Potential Chair

The most practical approach for selecting a chair is to literally interview potential candidates, just like you would interview job candidates (except with much more humility on your part). Michael Arter describes this approach most succinctly:

I developed a “short list” of potential chairs. I had developed a close relationship with those on the list from classes, social settings, and while functioning as a graduate assistant and assistant director of the undergraduate advising center. This allowed for a relaxed and comfortable discussion with each potential chair. Each professor was aware I was “interviewing” in search of a chair and all were open and honest in providing guidance and direction for the process. One of the candidates did not feel they were the best choice for a qualitative project and was dropped from consideration. The “qualitative candidate” was overcommitted and was faced with a family medical issue that prohibited serving as chair, but did allow for service on the committee. I had worked as a graduate and research assistant to the professor I finally chose as my chair. He did not consider himself a “qualitative person,” but we were both very comfortable with each other from prior research projects and there was a reciprocal respect between us.

THE ROLE OF THE ADVISOR

Once you have formed a dissertation committee, it is essential that you establish and maintain rapport with the committee members, particularly the chair. The styles of chairing a dissertation range from a completely hands-off approach to micromanagement of the dissertation, with most chairs falling somewhere in the middle of this continuum.

For example, Michelle Miller-Day had a hands-off committee, or as she states,

I was pretty much blessed with a committee who said, “You are doing something that we have never done . . . so go for it!” They pretty much kept out of my way and let me do my thing, although my advisor did ask for field note updates.

In contrast, Karyn McKinney reports a different type of interaction with her advisor,

My advisor helped in many ways. Because I had already been writing with him, he had taught me how to use qualitative data to study the sociology of race. He was supportive of my topic, once I showed him how interested I was and where it would fit into the existing research. He was always available, by phone, e-mail, or face-to-face, to discuss the ideas I was having while analyzing the data. He read chapters as I completed them, and offered suggestions that made the project imminently better. Finally, he simply would not allow me to sabotage myself through unnecessary perfectionism.

It is up to doctoral students to get a feel for their chairs' preferences. Having said that, here are some suggestions for communicating with your chair.

Sharing Ideas

Amir once heard a professor complain about a student who repeatedly bothered him with, as he put it, “brain farts” (i.e., fleeting thoughts). He has since lost respect for that professor and his unhelpful approach toward his students, but there is a lesson to be learned here. Remember that the difference between a so-called brain fart and insight is timing and packaging. First, it is generally not a good idea to pour out your thoughts at the doorstep of your advisor as she is preparing for class or trying to hurry to a meeting. Wait. Make an appointment to discuss your progress on the dissertation or invite your chair to lunch and carefully take the time to explain your ideas. Second, develop and polish your ideas before presenting them to your chair. Whereas some chairs are incredibly effective at helping you pull a string out of a mess of seemingly disconnected ideas, others lack the capacity or the inclination for this kind of brainstorming. So play it safe, and think before you speak.

“Driving the Bus”

Ultimately, the role of the advisor is to help you finish *your* project. Sara Crawley illustrated this point by using the analogy of “driving the bus”:

Throughout graduate school, I used a metaphor that guided my decisions and helped me organize my program and reason through pitfalls and politically dangerous situations. The metaphor I used was “I’m driving the bus.” I began graduate school because of personal, passionate interests and I felt it important to hold on to those ideals throughout to direct my work. The metaphor extends like this: You can get on the bus and ride along. Everyone is invited and you are welcome to get off the bus if you choose. But I’m driving and I’m determining the direction. I may let someone else navigate for a while if their expertise is helpful. But I ultimately decide where we are going with my research.

The point here is although one can and should expect a good deal of assistance and support in graduate school, at the end the responsibility for completing the dissertation lies with the student. The casual atmosphere of some graduate programs may give the impression that the rules of professionalism

do not apply in academia. This could be a dangerous assumption. In some ways, academia is very “corporate”—there are deadlines, expectations, and competition for limited resources. Accept these as the rules of the game without taking any of it too personally. Consider, for example, Darin Weinberg’s balanced approach to his advisor:

Though my advisor sometimes gave me feedback and advice I didn’t really want to hear about my work, this was to my mind much appreciated candor and not in any way insulting or disrespectful. I didn’t have any difficulties with him, and sought out his guidance as much as I could get it. We formally met perhaps every 4 to 6 weeks and once in awhile informally as well.

Note that the frequency of meetings with your chair will vary during your dissertation. The typical pattern is that you meet more frequently at first when you first conceptualize the project, maybe less so during fieldwork, and maybe more again toward the end. Regardless of how often you meet with your chair, make the most of these sessions. In particular, never give the impression that you are not willing to learn. In the haste to impress an advisor, it is easy to come across as a know-it-all. This is a deadly sin in academia, particularly at the graduate level. Once you are labeled as someone who is not educable, the doors start closing. This reaction on the part of the faculty may be justified in light of the institutional mission of academia. The academic enterprise is based on the assumption that students are there to learn, not to lecture the faculty. If you have a strong opinion about a particular issue, phrase it tentatively and, when possible, in the form of a question.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

The logic and necessity of protecting the dignity and safety of the research participants is widely accepted among social scientists today, but we should remember that this has not always been the case. Most of us are aware that the Nazis used concentration camp victims as guinea pigs in their diabolical medical experiments, but relatively few are familiar with equally egregious but less publicized violations of human rights under the auspices of research here in the United States. In one of the most troubling examples of unscrupulous research, a group of 399 African American men afflicted with syphilis unknowingly became participants in a medical experiment that lasted nearly forty years until it was finally exposed in the early 1970s (Jones, 1981, pp. 1–23). From the 1930s to the 1970s, the physicians assigned to these men deliberately did not treat them for their ailment, even after penicillin was developed and could have

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been used as a cure. Instead, the patients were secretly experimented on to examine the effects of untreated syphilis. By the time this U.S. Public Health Service study was exposed and subsequently terminated, many of the patients whose condition had gone untreated for years had either died horribly or become severely ill.

Instances of unethical research are not limited to medical experiments. Among social scientists in the United States, a well-known example of unethical research is Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* (1970). Humphreys studied anonymous homosexual encounters in semipublic places. Specifically, he was interested in the background of men who had sex with other men in public restrooms. After positioning himself in a restroom in a city park, he gained the trust of the men who frequented it by acting as a lookout for them while they engaged in sexual activities. Humphreys secretly recorded their license plate numbers, and with the help of the police, discovered who they were and where they lived. Months later, he visited the men in their homes disguised as a survey researcher. He gathered additional information about these men and their families and subsequently published his research in a book that was widely praised before questions were raised about its ethics. One of the main findings of his work was that many of the men in his study were married and of middle-class background—a discovery that was made possible through the covert invasion of the subjects' privacy.

Such flagrant abuses of research subjects in the name of science have led to the establishment of codes of research ethics. While these may vary across disciplines and national boundaries, there are a number of general principles that most researchers would agree with. Most prominent among these are (a) voluntary participation, (b) protection of research participants, (c) disclosure of potential benefits and risks to participants, and (d) obtaining informed consent. IRBs emerged in academic institutions as bureaucratic entities responsible for regulating and enforcing these important research ethics (Marvasti, 2003a).

Ideally, when you undergo and successfully complete an IRB review, you accomplish two things. First, you have benefited from the advice of several other academics trained to detect any potential flaws in your research design that could pose a threat to the participants. The advantage of this guidance cannot be overstated. A qualitative researcher's enthusiasm and his desire to become intimately familiar with a topic could blind him to the adverse consequences of his research. The IRB committee could alert you to problems before any inadvertent harm is done. Second, when you present your research participants with a university-approved informed consent, you earn their confidence that you are a trained researcher with the backing of a legitimate academic institution. This could help you establish rapport and address any concerns your respondents might have about answering your questions or sharing their private lives with you.

All studies conducted under the auspices of a federally funded university are required to receive IRB approvals. This applies to research conducted by any student or faculty member affiliated with the institutions, regardless of where the research is actually done. IRB reviews fall into three categories: full review (usually takes 2 to 4 weeks), expedited reviews (usually 2 weeks), and exemption (the researcher is exempted from all or parts of the IRB requirements). In most cases, the process of obtaining an IRB approval is relatively simple and straightforward.

However, qualitative researchers sometimes encounter unique problems in obtaining an IRB approval. Indeed, an IRB guidebook published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services explicitly notes the difficulties confronting qualitative researchers where informed consent is concerned. Specifically, in a section titled “Fieldwork,” the guidebook states,

Fieldwork, or ethnographic research, involves observation of and interaction with the persons or group being studied in the group’s own environment, often for long periods of time. Since fieldwork is a research process that gains shape and substance as the study progresses, it is difficult, if not impossible, to specify detailed contents and objectives in a protocol.

After gaining access to the fieldwork setting, the ongoing demands of scientifically and morally sound research involve gaining the approval and trust of the persons being studied. These processes, as well as the research itself, involve complex, continuing interactions between researcher and hosts that cannot be reduced to an informed consent form. Thus, while the idea of consent is not inapplicable in fieldwork, IRBs and researchers need to adapt prevailing notions of acceptable protocols and consent procedures to the realities of fieldwork. IRBs should keep in mind the possibility of granting a waiver of informed consent. (Penslar, 2007)

Evidently, even the government agency in charge of defining and enforcing guidelines for dealing with human subjects is aware that qualitative researchers face unique challenges in gaining IRB approvals (it is worth noting that this guidebook was prepared by a lawyer, Robin Levin Penslar, J.D.; the “ORRR Program Officer”; and a physician, Joan P. Porter, D.P.A.). In this section we consider the special IRB issues confronting qualitative researchers in the context of several examples.

Defining Research

As noted earlier, qualitative research as a whole is much more open-ended than quantitative research. In most cases, quantitative research officially commences

with the administration of a survey to a sample of respondents, but, as shown above, qualitative researchers could begin data collection inadvertently. For example, Amir's life history as a person of Middle Eastern descent is data for his research, but he never thought about obtaining approval from anyone to write about his personal experiences. At the core of this issue is what is considered research and when it begins. U.S. federal law offers this formal definition for the word: "Research means a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

This definition provides a seemingly clear institutional mission for IRB committees. In practice, however, numerous university workshops have been held to inform the faculty and students as to what exactly constitutes research. For example, given that qualitative research is not "generalizable," is it considered research under this regulation? The answer depends on the inclinations of the particular IRB committee and the academic institution involved.

As Cary Nelson (2003) notes, there is a good deal of confusion regarding IRB oversight on research involving in-depth interviews. For example, some universities exempt journalism students and faculty from the IRB approval process, even though they essentially do the kinds of interviews that qualitative researchers do. Nelson suggests that one explanation for this inconsistency is that IRB administrators fear that regulating journalism would border violating freedom of speech protections provided under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (for a discussion on the constitutionality of IRBs, see Philip Hamburg, 2004). According to Nelson, another IRB strategy for defining research is, "If it's published in a scholarly journal, it's research" (2003, p. 33). Of course, this interpretation raises another question; namely, what is a "scholarly journal"? In light of these confusions, qualitative researchers often find themselves educating IRB members about the philosophy and methods of their approach. The rule of thumb here is that if you are not sure if you need an IRB approval, check with your committee chair and contact the university IRB for guidance.

Differing Priorities

University IRBs are governed by a set of priorities, some of which directly concern the ideal of protecting research subjects from harm whereas others are about protecting the institution as a corporate and legal entity. For example, IRB committees are very concerned about shielding the university from potential lawsuits. In fact, in some cases, the board includes an attorney whose responsibility is to ensure that a proposed research project is free from litigation risk. In the words of Michelle Miller-Day, who served on an IRB committee,

The board members are thinking, how could a participant in this study sue us? How can we protect against that (i.e., cover our asses)? And how can we protect the participant from us (i.e., cover their asses)? As long as you think of all possibilities where someone might get harmed and cover the collective potential risks, then you are halfway there.

However, for researchers, participants are not seen as potential litigators but as subjects who can provide information about a particular topic. In a sense, this results in two visions of the research participant, “the potential litigators” (the IRB view) and “the sources of information” (the researcher view). Although this distinction raises important theoretical issues (see *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2003, 10(2), for a list of articles related to this topic), the practical point for us as IRB applicants is that we must fit our priorities into the protective priorities of our academic institution. As Michelle notes, the key is to convince the IRB board that in essence there is no potential for a lawsuit. One way to provide this assurance is to ask research participants to sign what amounts to a contract detailing (a) the objectives of the study, (b) its voluntary nature, and (c) any potential harm. The participants are expected to sign this document, and it is to be archived along with the data (in case there is a lawsuit).

The challenge for doctoral students is to package the open-ended contingencies of qualitative research in a way that convinces IRB members (who often are unfamiliar with this kind of methodology) that no risk is involved. Again, survey researchers have an easier job with this because the survey questions are designed in advance and clearly demarcate the boundaries of the project. In contrast, qualitative research moves in unpredicted directions; an informant’s answers to a question may result in a line of inquiry that was not planned from the start. Michelle Miller-Day offers this advice for overcoming this sort of challenge:

The biggest problem for qualitative researchers, as I see it, is that in our data collection we have to be flexible and attuned to “emergent data.” While qualitative researchers can dance to our particular rendition of flexible and emergent, lawyers and some quantitative researchers find this rendition lacking in rhythm (structure) and believe it is chaotic (not systematic). We need to provide structure and a systematic *outline* of what is planned and give possible outcomes of “planned flexibility.”

The phrase “planned flexibility” is one way out of the IRB dilemma. It is not enough to inform the board that you are doing qualitative research and therefore are not sure about the types of questions asked, where, and how. They just won’t understand and agree with that line of reasoning. Instead, to the best of your ability give an outline of what shape or direction your research

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might take. In other words, give them something they can work with within the parameters of their institutional roles.

Some research projects have to be considerably modified due to IRB constraints. For example, Michael Arter states,

In the earliest planning for my research I had considered interviewing the spouses of the officers for the familial aspect of police stress. Based upon past decisions of the IRB at my institution, the plan to attempt to interview anyone other than police officers was abandoned.

Other researchers go through such a complicated IRB approval that the experience itself becomes part of the dissertation. This was certainly the case with Sylvia Ansay, who encountered particularly stringent demands in her research on house arrestees.

I experienced a major hurdle that seemed to come out of nowhere. I had worked closely with the IRB administrator in writing my proposal. She assured me that we had covered all our bases and there appeared to be no problems. Approval should be automatic, she said, just a matter of waiting a couple of weeks until the Board met. The process became complicated when the IRB decided that, although I was not receiving funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), I should have NIH approval for the project. The Board didn't give me any reasons for the decision; however, I filed the proposal with NIH as they required. An administrator at NIH telephoned me, surprised at the request because I was not seeking funding from them. I had no answers for her. She ended the conversation by saying the requirement raised "red flags," which they'd have to check out. That was the first of three or four phone calls between us. (I instigated two of these in response to letters from the administrator.) The first criticized the methodology, saying they had never heard of using life stories or narrative analysis as research. It wasn't "good science," she said. Later, I had to explain and defend every aspect of the research point by point. In the end, their argument against approval shifted to a concern with my personal safety. They requested a conference call with my professor, during which an NIH attorney urged him not to support the in-home interviews, to consider the liability. When he could not be persuaded, they approved the project with a disclaimer that approval would not have been given if I had been applying for NIH funding. My experience with NIH became a chapter of my dissertation and has been published in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* (Vol. 25).

The IRB committee in this case seems overly protective of Sylvia and her research participants. Though she eventually secured an approval for her project, it is evident that her research would have been completely stymied without the support of her dissertation chair. This sort of overprotection is especially noticeable where sensitive topics or “deviant populations” are concerned. Consider, for example, Sara Crawley’s description of the IRB mandates for her research with lesbians:

I did have to take some pains to make the IRB comfortable with the group I was interviewing. Given that I wanted to interview “lesbians,” the IRB was more worried about protecting confidentiality than most of my narrators. Although I was careful to respect narrators, I found most participants were very willing and expected that they might talk about lesbian experience in the lesbian groups they normally attended to talk about lesbian experience. Ironically, for me, getting IRB approval was more about making the IRB comfortable about issues that the naturally occurring community was already comfortable discussing.

In Sara’s case, the IRB approval seems to hinge more on the board’s comfort level with lesbians and talk of lesbianism than the community members’ ease about discussing their lifestyles.

In a related case, Eileen O’Brien, in her study of antiracists, found that the research participants wanted to be identified by name in the research despite the IRB requirements for anonymity.

I was dealing with an area of activists who are pretty silenced/ignored in history—white antiracists—and some people felt that this neglect was very calculated because it prevents whites from having visible alternative models of whiteness to follow, thereby subverting any major transformations of the dominant group in society. So I asked my advisor about it, and he said as long as I had it documented that they gave me permission to use their real names, he didn’t think it would be a problem. But this issue never actually went back to the IRB. I think this illustrates how qualitative research needs to be adaptable, and that following “standard protocol” will not always work best depending on the topic and context of the data you need to obtain.

It is important to remember that not every researcher experiences hardships with the IRB approval process. Many projects sail through, so to speak. The extent of difficulty depends on the topic you have chosen to study and on your

academic institutions' research standards. Generally, topics related to crime, deviance, and marginal populations go through a more rigorous IRB process. Again, as Michelle notes, the key phrase for getting your application through is "planned flexibility." This is echoed by Charles Bosk's (2004) recommendation that qualitative researchers should educate IRB members and work to reform the review process to suit their needs.

IRB Reviews and Controversial Topics

On a more cynical level, the IRB committees can be seen as a barrier to progressive research, or as Nikitah Imani notes, they can "stymie antioppression research." Although IRBs can play a significant role in ensuring the safety of research participants, their survey-friendly protocol may in the long run discourage more innovative research projects, especially those aimed at investing social inequality (e.g., poverty, racism, sexism). Such studies may invariably involve some degree of risk, both for the subjects and for the organization where inequality is practiced. As Nelson states,

Of course, "respect for persons" can hardly entail respect for every human action, but IRBs are ill equipped to negotiate the difference. Instead, they often give unquestioned allegiance to a concept that might be given more nuanced application to, say, Ku Klux Klan or Nazi Party members, who might merit humanity qualified with disapproval and who might on occasion appropriately be challenged aggressively in an interview. A historian might well wish to investigate the self-understanding of a Ku Klux Klan member and might choose to present a neutral account of the organization, but academic freedom means that the decision to do so needs to be the historian's, not that of an IRB. One consequence of an unreflective commitment to "respect for persons" is that IRBs have great difficulty accepting research destined to be critical of its "human subjects." (2003, p. 32)

As seen in the passage above, an increasing number of social scientists, and academics in general, are concerned about IRBs' growing "ethics creep" (Haggerty, 2004) into their research. Initially, the social scientists responded to IRB demands with incredulity and amusement. For example, in a magazine interview, Howard Becker joked that if he was required to undergo rigorous IRB reviews, he would circumvent the bureaucracy by redefining his research as "conceptual art" (Shea, 2000). Four years later, in response to Haggerty's "Ethics Creep: Governing Social Science Research in the Name of Ethics," Howard Becker writes:

What began years ago as a sort of safeguard against doctors injecting cancer cells into research patients without first asking them if that was OK has turned into a serious, ambitious bureaucracy with interests to protect, a mission to promote, and a self-righteous and self-protective ideology to explain why it is all necessary. . . . I never had occasion to try out the idea I suggested to the reporter from *Lingua Franca*, of describing my work as conceptual art or performance art. . . . But if I did I suspect the response would be to change the rules to include art projects. (2004, pp. 415–416)

Becker goes on to point out that some of his research on medical students, for example, could not have been conducted with the same academic rigor under the new IRB rules. His final recommendation to social scientists is, “start fighting this thing full time and don’t give up an inch we don’t have to” (2004, p. 416).

Similarly, Nikitah speculates that IRBs may inadvertently block the aspirations of researchers who want to dig deeper, as it were. Moreover, in their capacity to monitor and approve research, IRBs can become a sort of “university research police” that controls the production of knowledge. Given that IRBs are a relatively new institutional invention, it remains to be seen how they will evolve to fulfill their mission.

For now, the IRB approval is a necessary part of doing research at most U.S. institutions of higher education. Based on our contributors’ comments and our own experience with obtaining IRB approvals, we offer the following checklist to help facilitate your application process.

1. Learn about the IRB guidelines at your particular institution (typically, this can be done by visiting their Web site).
2. Describe your research in simple terms and do not assume that your application will be reviewed by someone with expertise in qualitative research.
3. Prior to submitting the final application, contact your IRB office for clarifications on the informed consent procedures. In some cases, your research may be exempt from the requirement of a written informed consent.
4. Be cordial to the IRB staff and let them know you are willing to address any concerns about privacy or potential harm to the research participants.
5. Expect some delays in the IRB process as you may be asked to revise and resubmit the original application several times before your research is deemed compliant with IRB guidelines.

6. If fellow graduate students have done projects similar to the one you are proposing, ask them how they went about obtaining their IRB approvals.

DATA COLLECTION

One of the unique features of qualitative research, and what really separates it from quantitative research, is that data collection is not limited to a particular survey instrument or a set of variables. Qualitative data collection, especially with ethnographic research, is an open-ended process that encompasses all the contextual information related to the research topic and the research site. In some cases, information that was collected for a different purpose or observations that were originally not part of your research might become data. Consider, for example, Karyn McKinney's research on white identities, which started as a class project:

I had, in a sense, already begun data collection before I decided on my dissertation topic. As an assignment for a course I was teaching, I had asked my students to write their racial autobiographies. I didn't realize this was "data" that I was collecting at that time. The students' stories showed how racial and ethnic identity is a process, not a static characteristic. They were fascinating. After deciding to use the initial student autobiographies as data, and obtaining the consent that I needed, I asked colleagues to collect more data for me in their own classes, at two other universities in the area. These colleagues offered their students extra credit for contributing to my work, and the students sent me their autobiographies via e-mail, which made it very easy later to begin analysis of them (the originals I had received were in hard copy, and I had to scan them into my computer). The extra credit was, of course, offered to students of any racial or ethnic background, although I only used those of white students for this project. In order to guide students in their writing, I gave them a list of questions, the same that I had given to my class, that would give them an idea of the kinds of stories and experiences I was interested in. They were told that they did not have to answer every question, and could add other information they felt was relevant. So the data for my dissertation came from three universities. I ended up with about 60 autobiographies.

It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to use their existing relationships and contacts for their research. For example, Sara Crawley writes about how she used her existing rapport with the lesbian community to collect data for her research on gender roles among lesbians.

I had chosen to study lesbians, an identity that I hold myself. I was already familiar with the local community and knew where to access narrators. I found focus groups particularly easy to organize because I was looking for “naturally occurring” settings (in the sense that I did not arrange them, but participants would be there regardless of my research). So for focus groups, I approached preexisting groups and simply asked to be their topic for the evening. As a result, I intervened less as a researcher in creating the groups, as well as needed to expend little energy organizing places, time, participants, etc.

Similarly, Michael Arter, in his research on undercover police officers, used his existing contacts.

I capitalized on my prior law enforcement experience to gain access to the departments from which I collected data. Some of the agencies I contacted were personally known to me and others had individuals who worked there who knew me from my time in law enforcement.

In Amir’s research on Middle Eastern Americans, he actually interviewed members of his family and incorporated a good deal of personal experiences into his research. However, using existing opportunities does imply there is no planning involved in qualitative data collection. As we will see in the coming chapters, there are still many choices to be made about the focus, scope, and duration of the study.

THE ROLE OF THEORY

Arguably, any research endeavor is theoretical. That is, certain assumptions about the social world are always present and influence our observations. Having said that, the degree to which theory is an explicit part of research varies considerably across different dissertations. Some researchers seem to have a formal theoretical model that guides their work from the start. For example, Michael Arter reports,

The theoretical schema of general strain theory seemed to comport with a substantial portion of the literature review on my topic. Basically, the academic literature on policing pointed to strain theory as a model for understanding the structural conditions of policing and police officers’ behavior. I felt it was a logical decision to apply the theory directly in my study. I also allowed the data to become grounded as the collection and analytical processes evolved.

Arter's theoretical choices are guided by a review of the literature (e.g., a reading of what other academics have published on the topic). This approach is quite effective if you don't want to reinvent the wheel, so to speak. Certain ideas may be normatively accepted in the field, and your research could build on the existing knowledge. However, as Michael notes, there is also room for **grounded theory** (a la Glaser and Strauss, and Charmaz), or a sort of bottom-up, or **inductive**, approach to theorizing (we will say more on this in the later chapters).

Overall, the experience of our colleagues suggests that the role of theory in qualitative research varies on a continuum that ranges from formal theory (i.e., a line of reasoning with explicit assumptions and a particular intellectual history) to data-specific analytical orientations (a way of making sense of the data at hand that makes no attempt at universal generalizations). Some of these variations were discussed more formally in Chapter 2, in the context of Gubrium and Holstein's *New Language of Qualitative Method* (1997). Many of our colleagues fall somewhere in the middle of this continuum, as in the case of Michael Arter, whose work was simultaneously informed by formal theory and open to unique characteristics of his data.

Darin Weinberg's position on theory further highlights this kind of flexible theorizing:

My own orientation to theory is rather broader than the one we often find in theory textbooks. For me, theory simply refers to the analytic relevance of your empirical work to more general questions being debated in your academic field or fields. Hence, I was interested in issues like power, **social constructionism** versus realism, macro-/microrelationships, structure and agency, and material and ideological structure, and I thought a lot about how these issues were playing out in my own research settings and how what was going on in my settings might highlight things that my academic colleagues might find interesting or valuable with respect to these more general topics.

DATA ANALYSIS

To start with, anyone who has ever done qualitative data analysis will tell you that writing and analysis coexist. This is not necessarily the case in quantitative research, where much of the analysis is done using a computer software program, and once all the tables are generated, the writing of the results begins. In qualitative research, we write explanatory notes (i.e., analysis) as

we collect and transcribe the data. Consider, for example, Karyn McKinney's approach to data analysis:

First, I read through all of my data, and while doing so, I created a list of "themes" I found in the data, with subthemes. Of course, this was an ongoing process, where I several times added new subthemes until I had a final list. Next, I began to try to code the data using a qualitative software program, QUALPRO. I found that doing so was taking more time than it was worth. So I simply went through each autobiography in WordPerfect and placed a theme or subtheme at the beginning of various sections, in brackets. Each portion of every autobiography was coded in some way. Then, when it was time to begin writing, I simply went through files and searched for these key words for themes to select quotes for each section. I organized and wrote my dissertation according to the major categories of themes I seemed to be finding in my analysis. These were whiteness as discourse, whiteness as stories, and whiteness as identity. This organization came to me through my analysis.

As Karyn notes, analysis of data provides a method for organizing and eventually writing the dissertation. Again, the writing and analysis are not separate, sequential stages, but they are intertwined and simultaneous.

In fact, as Michelle Miller-Day notes, the trick is to not lose sight of this intricate relationship between analysis and writing. In her words, "The difficulty lies in disciplining yourself to write your field notes every night whether you feel like it or not. Writing your research memos and trying to examine connections while at the same time thinking of what questions you will pursue tomorrow." Here we can see that not only are writing and analysis linked but that the data collection is also part of the same process. Another researcher, Nikitah Imani, describes the process in this way:

I think it is vital to synthesize and catalog a lot of the data as you are getting inputs rather than gathering the data and beginning a separate process of writing. At one level, this helps you avoid the simple human problem of trying to retroactively reconstruct events and other things through memory. At another level, writing after all the data collection could cause one to take events out of the original context in which they were derived. It is critical that a qualitative researcher maintain, as I did throughout, a three-pronged research process involving (a) the actual data collection, (b) a journal about the data collection process as it takes place, and (c) a journal about changes in the perception of both of those

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processes as they unfold. Thus at the “end,” one has the raw data but also the equally important analysis of how one has transformed and been transformed by the research process. Having these three projects allowed me to, say, look at conversations and interviews from a session, look at my own initial take, and finally, look at how I approached the scene for subsequent events after that initial assessment.

To do effective data analysis, you must know your data, or as one of my professors used to say, “You must court your data.” Good social science writing, be it qualitative or quantitative, is embedded in the data. To ensure that the writing grows out of the data, become intimately familiar with every bit of information that your research generates. In Lara Foley’s words,

I became familiar with my interview transcripts initially during transcription. I used an extra-wide margin to make notes as I was transcribing and later when reading through transcripts and **coding**. My approach to data analysis is that I become intimately familiar with the data. Topics, themes, or specific arguments “jump out at me” or formulate in my head over time and then I pull together excerpts that work.

Believe it or not, data analysis can be fun. Sitting down and piecing together the different bits and pieces of interviews and observations into a coherent work can be an exhilarating creative process. This was the case for Sylvia Ansay, who states,

I transcribed all my own data, along with notes about the homes and family members interviewed. It took a long time, but I viewed it as the beginning of the analysis, as a way to get close to the data. It helped me to remember families in context and to begin identifying emergent themes. I analyzed individual narratives as I went along. I enjoyed working with the data, making minute-by-minute decisions, backtracking, reviewing, rethinking, feeling satisfied, and moving to the next step. I love working with words and I was doing what I loved. Besides, I don’t think I could have combined the various kinds of data and made the methodological shifts I needed to make along the way. For me, the fun of qualitative research rests in its endless possibilities.

WRITING

To the extent that qualitative writing is separate from analysis, it is mostly about knowing when to stop and deciding what should or should not be

included in the text. Qualitative writing, as Sylvia Ansay notes, offers “endless possibilities.” Well, in practice, tasks have to have a logical end. The challenge for most novice writers, to put it bluntly, is knowing when to shut up. Nikitah Imani, offers this advice for overcoming the problem:

The story frame really determined the selection of data to present. At the outset, I committed to get in as much as I could of the participants’ own words and ideas. Within that commitment, I wanted to make sure that I indeed told the story. Information that was not directly germane to give the reader a sense of the particular pieces of the story I wanted to render was set aside. I always say set aside, rather than excluded, since it’s more a question of them not relating to what’s being said than being denied arbitrarily. Much of the material I did not use in the dissertation has found its way back into the book and in other publications as good data about other questions I did not think about or choose to focus on at the time.

Nikitah’s advice can be summed up this way: decide what the story is, tell the story, and save whatever is not part of the story for another project. The emphasis on the narrative is echoed in Michelle Miller-Day’s account:

For my dissertation, I felt overwhelmed, I felt unsure, and I felt like, “who am I to interpret these people’s lives?” Then the chair of my committee reminded me that I was a social science narrator and I just needed to tell my story from my view trying to represent the characters in the story. This helped to get me jump-started. Then, and now, I always begin by writing a descriptive account of the story—of the people, of the setting, and of my reactions to it all. Then, once I have captured the people and their voices at least in part, I begin with my analysis of the data; trying to capture the human experience without reducing this experience to disembodied variables. I took a mountain of data and broke it into its parts and put it back together into a coherent story.

If the narrative model does not appeal to you, or just doesn’t fit your data, you might want to consider Eileen O’Brien’s more thematically driven approach:

On the advice of my advisor, I looked at a couple of recent dissertations of his advisees that he suggested. This helped me with an Introduction and Methods chapter. This also probably gave me the model for the number of chapters I would have, then a conclusion. My substantive chapters

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I basically organized around the three major research questions with which I originally began the project:

1. *Why* did they become antiracist?

(In other words, being white, why should they care about racism? What made them want to take it up as their life's work?)

2. *What* do they do?

(What are the specific antiracist actions they take in their everyday life? I used concrete examples here.)

3. *How* do they define racism?

(This question basically focused on the ideology that guided their work.)

QUANTITATIVE OR QUALITATIVE?

Whereas qualitative researchers might be more open to flexibility of the data and the research process as a whole than quantitative researchers, as you will see in the coming chapters, there are many similarities between the two methodologies. A quantitative dissertation in many respects involves the steps outlined previously. In fact, some graduate students combine quantitative and qualitative methods (i.e., they use “mixed methods”) for their research. For example, John Linn writes,

As I was going through graduate school, there was an ongoing debate over the centrality of one form of social science research over another. Specifically, some very difficult and contentious debates revolved around the “proper place” for qualitative research in the social sciences as opposed to quantitative. My master's degree was directed by an individual who was working at the margins of both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The underlying idea was to take qualitative data and quantify it. I was enthralled by the concept and accepted the orientation readily. As I moved to my doctoral institution, the old debates were still lingering and it was easy to identify those oriented to qualitative research as opposed to quantitative. In fact, there were no classes offered that were positioned to an in-depth study of qualitative research. Moreover, a form of implicit pressure was brought to bear on doing quantitative research—“clean and easy” was the catch phrase. Nonetheless, for my dissertation I chose to follow a mixed-methods approach. My decision was based on the realization that while

quantitative methods provide very interesting data about how much or how many questions, they missed some of the “story.” The analogy I used was that of people in poverty. A determination can be made as to how many, where, when, and the like, but what was missing, from my perspective, was a very simple and compelling question—what is it like to be in poverty? So, when it came to my topic, employee loyalty, it was not simply a matter of determining who might have been loyal or not, but also what underlying interpersonal dynamics were at play, how did they factor into loyalty, and what conditions had to be met for loyalty to exist.

As John’s story shows, it might be wiser to think of quantitative and qualitative methodologies as complementary parts of the systematic, empirical search for knowledge.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Admittedly, there is considerable overlap between the themes discussed in this chapter. For example, as we noted, data collection, analysis, and writing are virtually inseparable in qualitative research. Thus these categories are not intended to be treated as mutually exclusive, but their main purpose is to show you the diversity of research experiences. If, in selecting your topic, you are pushed and pulled by different forces, you are not unique. Doing qualitative research is in many respects no different than doing everyday life—it is complex and sometimes downright chaotic. The point of this book and other advice and mentorship you receive is to help you manage this chaos and direct it into a coherent research project.

Obviously, there are many different stories that research students can tell about their experience and we do not pretend that what you have read was typical or representative. Nonetheless, there are several clear messages in these stories that are worth listening to.

We set these out following this paragraph as a 16-point guide. Obviously, like any recipe, you will, of course, need to apply it to your own circumstances. Nevertheless, the following points apply to all levels of student research, from BA and MA dissertations to the PhD.

1. Begin in familiar territory: If you can, work with data that is close at hand and readily accessible. For instance, if you have data from another study that you can (re)analyze, grab the opportunity. There are no brownie points to

be obtained for gathering your data in difficult circumstances. Make it easy on yourself at this stage so that you can concentrate your energies on the infinitely more important task of data analysis.

2. Find a settled theoretical orientation: As we stress throughout this book, research is never just about techniques. Find a theoretical approach that makes sense to you and could provide a basis for inference and data analysis.

3. Narrow down your topic: Strive to find a topic that is appropriate to your theory and data and is workable (this issue is discussed at length in Chapter 6).

4. Don't try to reinvent the wheel: In Chapter 5, we discuss what originality might mean in research. For the moment, we recommend that you look at previous successful dissertations in your university library or departmental files and, where possible, focus on work directed by your supervisor.

5. Keep writing: Commit your ideas to paper. Don't worry how short or rough your papers are. Indeed, in some way, it makes more sense, initially at least, to submit 500-word pieces so that you can be guided in the right direction before you have expended too much time and effort.

6. Begin data analysis early: Don't be deflected away from early data analysis by literature reviews and the exigencies of data gathering. If you haven't got any data yourself at an early stage, try analyzing someone else's data—published data, your supervisor's data, and so forth (see Chapter 11).

7. Think critically about data: When you start to identify a pattern in your data, don't rush to conclusions. See how robust this pattern is by working comparatively with different parts of your data.

8. Use your dissertation chair: The chair can help you test out your ideas and give you confidence.

9. Use other resources and opportunities: Graduate students should take every opportunity to attend relevant conferences and, better still, to give conference papers and take appropriate training courses. Find out if there are study groups of research students working on similar topics. If not, try to establish such a group.

10. Do not expect a steady learning curve: Be prepared for the sequence of highs and lows that will inevitably happen. Treat setbacks as opportunities.

11. Keep a research diary: Keep a file of your current ideas, hopes, and worries. This file is an invaluable resource, which, as suggested in Chapter 22, can be used, in edited form, in your methodology chapter.

12.¹ Earmark blocks of working time: If you are researching part-time, it is crucial to find blocks of time in which you can focus solely on your research. Use this time for intensive data analysis and writing.

13. Do not reproach yourself: If you experience a setback, it may be best to take some time out to relax before you return to your research.

14. Treat field relations as data: How others treat you in the field is never just a technical matter. Reflect upon how your interaction with your subjects is shaping your data.

15. Understand that there is no “perfect” model of research design: Practical contingencies (e.g., access or the lack of it, the time you have available) are always going to affect any piece of research. Don’t be afraid of working with what data you happen to have. Your chair and other committee members will not be comparing your research with some perfect model, but they will expect you to have thought through the limitations of your data and your analysis (see Chapter 5).

16. Realize that it is never too early to think about job prospects: As we note in Chapter 29, your job prospects will be decided by your research interests, publications, and your training (who mentored you in graduate school). As you consider your dissertation topic and choice of methods, also give some thought to how your choices will limit or expand your employability.

CASE STUDY

As with Greg and Nikitah, chance factors were crucial in David’s choice of PhD topic. Whereas a research grant or access to a particular setting shaped Greg and Nikitah’s research, David’s committee and his own changing interests had a key influence on his topic. After having completed an MA at UCLA, David returned to the London School of Economics to do his PhD. He then discovered that one of his undergraduate teachers (Robert McKenzie, a political sociologist) expected that David would be supervised by him on a topic close to McKenzie’s own interests (e.g., voting behavior).

However, by this time, David’s interests had shifted away from political sociology and toward social class and status. Influenced by contemporary sociologists like C. Wright Mills and David Lockwood, he planned to conduct an interview study of white-collar workers at four different kinds of workplace, focusing on their lifestyles and aspirations. Not wishing to

(Continued)

1. Items 12 and 13 were suggested by Vicki Taylor after reading an earlier draft of this chapter.

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upset his undergraduate tutor, he included him on his committee, along with an industrial relations specialist, Ben Roberts.

David began his research interviews and, after two years, published a short note on his initial findings in the *British Journal of Sociology*. This shows the value of beginning data analysis at an early stage rather than allowing the data to accumulate.

Early data analysis has a further advantage: it allows you to reconsider the direction in which your research is heading. In David's case, such reconsideration had quite a drastic result:

- He started to worry about the reliability of data gathered from his semistructured interviews. How far did his respondents' answers to his prepared questions actually reflect their own experiences? Moreover, didn't his own assumptions come into play when he interpreted their answers to some open-ended questions?
- David now had a junior faculty post where he unexpectedly found himself teaching a course on the sociology of organizations. As a result, he published a paper on organization theory in *Sociology*. Was this a better topic for his PhD?

His joint supervisor, Ben Roberts, settled the matter. Having read David's published paper, he suggested that it might make sense to develop it in the form of a library-based, theoretical PhD. Seeing how quickly such a dissertation could be written, given David's reading for his teaching work, David switched topics. This example shows what you can gain by discussing the direction of your research with your supervisor.

Two years later, David was awarded his PhD at about the same time as his dissertation was published as a book (*The Theory of Organizations*). So, as a result of chance factors and his own research experience, David's research topic was totally redefined.

KEY POINTS

1. It helps to begin your research in familiar territory.
2. Find a settled theoretical orientation that works for you.
3. Once you get a feel for your field, narrow down your topic as soon as you can.
4. Don't try to reinvent the wheel—find what has worked for others and follow it.
5. Keep writing.
6. Begin data analysis immediately.
7. Think critically about your data—don't rush to conclusions.
8. Test out your ideas with your supervisor—don't worry if, in the early stages, you are often wide of the mark.

9. Use other resources and opportunities inside and outside your own department.
10. Do not expect a steady learning curve—no research study is without some disasters.
11. Keep a research diary.
12. Earmark blocks of working time to complete different activities.
13. Do not reproach yourself about setbacks.
14. Treat your relations within the field as data.
15. Understand that there is no perfect model of research design.

FURTHER READING

The best place to look for similar research histories is in the writings of students at your own university. BA students should seek to obtain past successful undergraduate senior theses from their department. Graduate students should study MA theses and PhD dissertations in the library, focusing particularly on the work of people having your supervisor. If the methodology chapters do not include an autobiographical account, try to contact the authors and discuss what lessons they draw from their experience.

EXERCISE 3.1

Keep a research diary in which you record

- changes in your ideas about topic, data, theory, and method;
- new ideas from the literature or from lectures and talk;
- meetings with your supervisor and their consequences; and
- life events and their consequences for your work.

At regular intervals (every 3 weeks, for example), reread your research diary and assess

- what you have achieved in that period,
- what would be required for you to do better in future, and
- your achievement targets for the next equivalent period.

EXERCISE 3.2

Keep a diary of your changing research interests. Think through what factors are influencing the direction that your research is taking. For instance, how much have you had a free choice in your topic? Have you taken advantage of any chance factors (e.g., research access, publications) that may have arisen? How important is it for you to complete your PhD dissertation or research project speedily? If so, have you chosen an appropriate topic?

You will find that such a research diary will not only help you reflect more on the direction your research is taking but will produce material that will prove invaluable when you write your methodology section (or chapter) for your research.

EXERCISE 3.3

Visit the Web site for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services at http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_guidebook.htm and browse through the *IRB Guidebook*. What sections of this guidebook apply to qualitative researchers? What are their recommendations for the protection of subjects in qualitative studies? Are these guidelines different than the ones suggested for quantitative or survey researchers?

EXERCISE 3.4

Visit your university's IRB Web site (this is typically under something like "The Office of Research Protections") and review their IRB procedures. If your university does not have an IRB office, simply search the words *IRB guidelines* on the Internet and review other universities' guidelines. Do you note any special guidelines or exemptions for qualitative research?