Qualitative Methods and Data Analysis

In this chapter you will learn how qualitative methods were used to illuminate the relationships, both individually and collectively, that gang members have with other social institutions (Decker & Van Winkle 1996). Throughout the chapter, you will learn from a variety of other examples that some of our greatest insights into social processes can result from what appear to be very ordinary activities: observing, participating, listening, and talking.

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

WHAT WE MEAN BY QUALITATIVE METHODS

“It’s more like a family away from home. You’re with your friends, you all stick together. They ain’t going to let nothing happen to you, you ain’t going to let nothing happen to them.” This was one youth’s reason for joining a gang. Such specific narrative information would not be easy to obtain from a structured survey. Thus, in an attempt to situate the origin, structure, and practices of street gangs within the social organizational context of the family and the larger community, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) obtained this information by conducting three years of fieldwork and interviews with 99 active gang members and 24 of their family members. As you will see, experimental or survey methodologies would be ill-suited to examine the unique institutional and cultural contexts of gang values and activities such as those uncovered by Decker and Van Winkle.

**Qualitative methods** refer to three distinctive research designs: **participant observation**, **intensive interviewing**, and **focus groups**. Participant observation and intensive interviewing are often used in the same project; focus groups combine some elements of these two approaches into a unique data-collection strategy.
Participant observation A qualitative method for gathering data that involves developing a sustained relationship with people while they go about their normal activities.

Intensive interviewing A qualitative method that involves open-ended, relatively unstructured questioning in which the interviewer seeks in-depth information on the interviewee’s feelings, experiences, and perceptions (Lofland & Lofland 1984: 12).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A focus on the events leading up to a particular event or outcome instead of general causal explanations. With its focus on particular actors and situations and the processes that connect them, qualitative research tends to identify causes of particular events embedded within an unfolding, interconnected action sequence (Maxwell 1996: 20–21). The language of variables and hypotheses appears only rarely in the qualitative literature.

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

Each component of the design may need to be reconsidered or modified in response to new developments or to changes in some other component . . . The activities of collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing the research questions, and identifying and eliminating
validity threats are usually all going on more or less simultaneously, each influencing all of the others. (Maxwell 1996: 2–3)

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

### Origins of Qualitative Research

Anthropologists and sociologists laid the foundation for modern qualitative methods while doing _field research_ in the early decades of the twentieth century. Dissatisfied with studies of native peoples that relied on second-hand accounts and inspection of artifacts, anthropologists Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski went to live in or near the communities they studied. Boas visited Native American villages in the American Northwest; Malinowski lived among New Guinea natives. Neither truly participated in the ongoing social life of those they studied (Boas collected artifacts and original texts, and Malinowski reputedly lived as something of a noble among the natives he studied), but both helped to establish the value of intimate familiarity with the community of interest and thus laid the basis for modern anthropology (Emerson 1983: 2–5).

Many of sociology’s field research pioneers were former social workers and reformers. Some brought their missionary concern with the spread of civic virtue among new immigrants to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago. Their successors continued to focus on sources of community cohesion and urban strain but came to view the city as a social science laboratory rather than as a focus for reform. They adopted the fieldwork methods of anthropology for studying the “natural areas” of the city and the social life of small towns (Vidich & Lyman 1994). By the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, qualitative researchers were emphasizing the value of direct participation in community life and sharing in subjects’ perceptions and interpretations of events (Emerson 1983: 6–13).

### Case Study: Life in the Gang

The use of fieldwork techniques to study gangs has a long tradition in a variety of cities, including Thrasher’s (1927) classic study of gangs in Chicago, and others, including Whyte (1943), Hagedorn (1988), Vigil (1988), Padilla (1992), Sanchez-Jankowski (1991), and Moore (1978, 1991), who spent over two decades studying the “home-boys” of Hispanic _barrios_ all over the country. All these researchers employed a fieldwork approach to the study of gangs rather than the more structured approaches offered by quantitative methods.

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

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

There were several questions in which Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were interested: First, we were interested in motivations to join gangs, the process of joining the gang, the symbols of gang membership, the strength of associational ties, the structure or hierarchy within the gang, motivations to stay (or leave) the gang, and how this generation of St. Louis gangs began. The second set of issues concerned the activities gang members engaged in. These included such things as turf protection, drug sales and use, and violence, as well as conventional activities. A unique feature of our work is its focus on families. There has been little research examining specifically the links between gang members and their family members. For this reason, we have separated the family from our analysis of other social institutions and devote special attention to this relationship. (1996: 54–55)

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

Because they did not rely on structured questionnaires with fixed-response formats, their data are primarily qualitative rather than quantitative.

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

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Other researchers have utilized a more direct observational strategy for studying gangs. For example, to illuminate the nuances and complexities of the role of a street gang in
community social life, Venkatesh (1997) conducted intensive participant observation in Blackstone, a midsize public housing development located in a poor ghetto of a large Midwestern city. As Venkatesh describes, “Having befriended these gang members, I moved into their world, accompanying them into Blackstone and other spaces where they were actively involved in illicit economic activities, member recruitment, and the general expansion of their street-based organization” (1997: 4). As this quote eloquently depicts, participant observation, called fieldwork in anthropology, is a method of studying natural social processes as they happen (in the field rather than in the laboratory) and leaving them relatively undisturbed. It is the seminal field research method, a means for seeing the social world as the research subjects see it, in its totality, and for understanding subjects’ interpretations of that world (Wolcott 1995: 66). By observing people and interacting with them in the course of their normal activities, participant observers seek to avoid the artificiality of experimental designs and the unnatural structured questioning of survey research (Koegel 1987: 8).

The term participant observer actually represents a continuum of roles (see Exhibit 7.2), ranging from being a complete observer who does not participate in group activities and is publicly defined as a researcher, to being a covert participant who acts just like other group members and does not disclose his or her research role. Many field researchers develop a role between these extremes, publicly acknowledging being a researcher but nonetheless participating in group activities. In some settings, it is possible to observe covertly without acknowledging being a researcher or participating.

Choosing a Role

The first concern of all participant observers is to decide what balance to strike between observing and participating and whether to reveal their role as researchers. These decisions must take into account the specifics of the social situation being studied, the researcher’s own background and personality, the larger sociopolitical context, and ethical concerns. The balance of participating and observing that is most appropriate also changes many times during most projects. And the researcher’s ability to maintain either a covert or an overt role will be challenged many times.

Complete Observation

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

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

Both neighborhood and patrol officers’ shifts were observed, either on foot with neighborhood officers, or in squad cars with patrol officers. This component of
the project also permitted gathering some observational information about citizens’ reactions to police delivery of services . . . Typically, we tried to work the same shifts as the neighborhood police officers, and we shadowed the NPO and each corresponding patrol officer during the same shift. (1999: 232–233)

As clearly depicted in this quote, the “shadowing” is visible. Thus the researcher’s very presence as an observer alters the social situation being observed. It is not natural in most social situations to have an observer present, who at some point will record their observations for research and publication purposes. The observer thus sees what individuals do when they are being observed, which is not necessarily what they would do without an observer. This is called a reactive effect, and the extent to which it can be a problem varies...
with the situation. In Miller’s (1999) study, her long tenure as an observer made her presence commonplace, thereby serving to decrease the problem of reactive effects. She states,

Since I had spent so many hours over eighteen months with the Jackson City Police Department [fictional name], I had grown to be a familiar face; this, I believe, decreased respondents’ tendencies toward social desirability. Officers took my presence for granted in the briefing room, the hallways, the interview rooms, and in the field, including me in jokes and informal conversation in the coffee shop. (1999: 235)

In general, in social settings involving many people where observing while standing or sitting does not attract attention, the complete observer is unlikely to have much effect on the social processes. On the other hand, when the social setting involves few people and observing is unlike the usual activities in the setting, or when the observer differs in obvious respects from the participants, the complete observer is more likely to have an impact.

### Participation and Observation

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

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

My aim was to gain an intimate view of Cornerville life. My first problem, therefore, was to establish myself as a participant in the society so that I would have a position from which to observe. I began by going to live in Cornerville, finding a room with an Italian family . . . It was not enough simply to make the acquaintance of various groups of people. The sort of information that I sought required that I establish intimate social relations, and that presented special problems. Since illegal activities are prevalent in Cornerville, every newcomer is under suspicion . . . I put in a great deal of time simply hanging around with them [the men] and participating in their various activities. This active participation gave me something in common with them so that we had other things to talk about besides the weather. It broke down the social barriers and made it possible for me to be taken into the intimate life of the group. (1943: v–vii)

Because of the great deal of time he spent with each gang and social organization he was studying, Whyte became accepted into each group and the community. The result was his famous book, *Street Corner Society* (1943). Sudhir Alladi Ventatesh’s (2000) book, *American Project*, about the relationship between gangs and a public housing development, will almost certainly become a classic as well. In it, he describes the evolution of his research methodology from structured interviews to participant observation:
They read my survey instrument, informed me that I was “not going to learn shit by asking these questions,” and said I would need to “hang out with them” if I really wanted to understand the experiences of African-American youth in the city. Over the next few months, I met with many of them informally to play racquetball, drink beer on the shores of Lake Michigan, attend their parties, and eat dinner with their families . . . Over an eighteen-month period, I logged notes on the activities of their gang, called the Black Kings. But it was the gang’s relationship with other people in the housing development that piqued my interest. Gang members were also schoolchildren, nephews, churchgoers, fathers, husbands, and so on. They were “gang members” at certain times and in certain contexts, such as narcotics trafficking and meetings in open park space, but most of the time their lives were characterized by involvement with work, family, school, and peers. (2000: xiv)

Participating and observing have two clear ethical advantages. Because group members know the researcher’s real role in the group, they can choose to keep some information or attitudes hidden. By the same token, the researcher can decline to participate in unethical or dangerous activities without fear of exposing his or her identity.

Even when researchers maintain a public identity as researchers, the ethical dilemmas arising from participation in group activities do not go away. In fact, researchers may have to prove themselves to group members by joining in some of their questionable activities. For example, police officers gave Van Maanen (1982) a nonstandard and technically prohibited pistol to carry on police patrols. Pepinsky (1980) witnessed police harassment of a citizen but did not intervene when the citizen was arrested. Trying to strengthen his ties with a local political figure in Cornerville, Whyte (1943) illegally voted multiple times in a local election.

Covert Participation

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

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

- **Covert participants cannot openly take notes or use any obvious recording devices.** They must write up notes based solely on memory and must do so at times when it is natural for them to be away from group members.
- **Covert participants cannot ask questions that will arouse suspicion.** Thus they often have trouble clarifying the meaning of other participants’ attitudes or actions.
The role of covert participation is difficult to play successfully. Covert participants will not know how regular participants act in every situation in which the researchers find themselves. Suspicion that researchers are not “one of us” may then have reactive effects, obviating the value of complete participation (Erikson 1967).

Covert participants must keep up the act at all times while in the setting under study. Researchers may experience enormous psychological strain, particularly in situations where they are expected to choose sides in intragroup conflict or to participate in criminal or other acts. Of course, some covert observers may become so wrapped up in their role that they adopt not just the mannerisms but also the perspectives and goals of the regular participants—they “go native.” At this point, they abandon research goals and cease to critically evaluate their observations.

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

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

Entering the Field

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

Developing trust with at least one member of the research setting is a necessity in qualitative research. Such a person can become a valuable informant throughout the project, and most participant observers make a point of developing trust with at least one informant in a group under study. The entry gambit that finally worked for Whyte (1943) was to rely on a local community leader for introductions. A helpful social worker at the local settlement house introduced Whyte to “Doc,” who agreed to help:
Well, any nights you want to see anything, I'll take you around. I can take you to the joints—gambling joints—I can take you around to the street corners. Just remember that you're my friend. That's all they need to know [so they won't bother you]. (1943: 291)

Miller (1999) gained access to the police department she studied through a chief of police who was extremely open to research. She also had two friends on the police force at the time of her study.

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

**Developing and Maintaining Relationships**

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

We were able to maintain good field relations with our subjects by strictly observing our own commitment to the confidentiality of their statements. Since we interviewed many individuals from the same gang, it was often the case that one member would want to know what an earlier participant had told us. We refused to honor such inquiries, reminding them that the same confidentiality that applied to their own answers also covered those of their fellow gang members. The strict confidentiality we were committed to was respected by our subjects, and appeared to enhance our own credibility as “solid” in their eyes. (1996: 46)

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

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

- Be prepared for special difficulties and tensions if multiple groups are involved. It is hard to avoid taking sides or being used in situations of intergroup conflict.

**Sampling People and Events**

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

We may be reassured by information indicating that a typical case was selected for study or that the case selected was appropriate in some way for the research question. We also must keep in mind that many of the most insightful participant observation studies were conducted in only one setting and draw their credibility precisely from the researcher’s thorough understanding of that setting. Nonetheless, studying more than one case or setting almost always strengthens the causal conclusions and makes the findings more generalizable (King, Keohane, & Verba 1994).

Decker and Van Winkle (1996) utilized the technique of snowball sampling. In addition, they chose to contact gang members directly, without the intervention of social service or criminal justice agencies, for several reasons, including their concern that they would be identified with law enforcement. To make their findings more generalizable, they interviewed members of several different gangs. Specifically, the snowball began with an earlier fieldwork project on active residential burglars (Wright & Decker 1994). The young members from this sample, along with contacts the field ethnographer had with several active street criminals, started the referral process. The initial interviewees then nominated other gang members as potential interview subjects.

**Theoretical sampling** is a systematic approach to sampling in participant observational research (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) used this technique to ensure that various subgroups such as race, sex, or type of gang were represented within their sample. When field researchers discover in an investigation that particular processes seem to be important, implying that certain comparisons should be made or that similar instances should be checked, the researchers then choose new settings or individuals to study as well, as shown in Exhibit 7.2 (Ragin 1994: 98–101). Based on the existing literature and anecdotal knowledge, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) knew that not all gang members were young minority-group males. They describe their strategy to obtain a full range of gang members as follows:

We aggressively pursued leads for female gangs and gang members as well as opportunities to locate older and nonblack gang members. These leads were more difficult to find and often caused us to miss chances to interview other gang members. Despite these “missed opportunities,” our sample is strengthened in that
it more accurately represents the diverse nature of gangs and gang members in St. Louis. (1996: 43)

The resulting sample of gang members in Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) study represented 29 different gangs; 16 were affiliated with the Crips and 13 were affiliated with the Bloods. Thus Decker and Van Winkle’s ability to draw from different gangs in developing conclusions gives us greater confidence in their study’s generalizability.

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

**Taking Notes**

Written field notes are the primary means of recording participant observation data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 1995). Of course, written no longer means handwritten; many field researchers jot down partial notes while observing and then retreat to their computers to write up more complete notes on a daily basis. The computerized text can then be inspected and organized after it is printed out, or it can be marked up and organized for analysis using one of several computer programs designed especially for the task.

It is almost always a mistake to try to take comprehensive notes while engaged in the field; the process of writing extensively is just too disruptive. The usual procedure is to jot down brief notes about the highlights of the observation period. These brief notes, called jottings, then serve as memory joggers when writing the actual field notes at a later time. With the aid of the brief notes and some practice, researchers usually remember a great deal of what happened, as long as the comprehensive field notes are written within the next 24 hours, that night or upon arising the next day.

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

Careful note-taking yields a big payoff for the researcher. On page after page, field notes will suggest new concepts, causal connections, and theoretical propositions. Social processes and settings can be described in rich detail, with ample illustrations.

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

**Managing the Personal Dimensions**

Our overview of participant observation is not complete without considering its personal dimensions. Because field researchers become a part of the social situation they are studying, they cannot help but be affected on a personal, emotional level. At the same time, those being studied react to researchers not just as researchers but as personal acquaintances—often as friends, sometimes as personal rivals. Managing and learning from this personal side of field research is an important part of any project.
The impact of personal issues varies with the depth of researchers' involvement in the setting. The more involved researchers are in multiple aspects of the ongoing social situation, the more important personal issues become and the greater the risk of "going native." Even when researchers acknowledge their role, "increased contact brings sympathy, and sympathy in its turn dulls the edge of criticism" (Fenno 1978: 277).

There is no formula for successfully managing the personal dimension of field research. It is much more art than science and flows more from the researcher's own personality and natural approach to other people than from formal training. Novice field researchers often neglect to consider how they will manage personal relationships when they plan and carry out their projects. Then, suddenly, they find themselves doing something they do not believe they should, just to stay in the good graces of research subjects, or juggling the emotions resulting from conflict within the group. As Whyte (1943) notes, these issues are even more salient when researchers place themselves in potentially dangerous situations. As Decker and Van Winkle (1996) explain:

In part, gang members were of interest to us because of their involvement in violence. Because of this, we took steps to insure our own safety. One of the guiding principles was to limit the number of people being separately interviewed at the same time and location. In addition, we steadfastly avoided interviewing members of rival gangs at the same time. The field ethnographer carried a portable phone with him at all times, to insure that he could check in with us and we with him. Despite our best efforts, there were occasions when these precautions did not work. The field ethnographer witnessed several drive-by shootings while on the way to pick up interview subjects, and on one occasion, he saw three of our subjects shot while waiting to be picked up for an interview. . . . Not all exposure to risk of physical danger comes through such obvious means, however; during one interview, when asked whether he owned any guns, a gang member reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a .32 caliber pistol. We assured him that we would have taken his word for it. (1996: 46)

If you plan a field research project, there are some general guidelines to follow:

- Take the time to consider how you want to relate to your potential subjects as people.
- Speculate about what personal problems might arise and how you will respond to them.
- Keep in touch with other researchers and personal friends outside the research setting.
- Maintain standards of conduct that make you comfortable as a person and that respect the integrity of your subjects (Whyte 1943: 300–317).

**SYSTEMATIC OBSERVATION**

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

Case Study: Systematic Observation in Chicago Neighborhoods

You first learned about Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush’s (1999) study of disorder and crime in urban neighborhoods in chapter 4. In this section, we’ll elaborate on their use of the method of systematic social observation of public spaces to learn about these neighborhoods. A systematic observational strategy increases the reliability of observational data by using explicit rules that standardize coding practices across observers (Reiss 1971). It is a method particularly well suited to overcoming one of the limitations of survey research on crime and disorder: Residents who are fearful of crime perceive more neighborhood disorder than do residents who are less fearful, even though both are observing the same neighborhood (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999: 606).

This ambitious multiple methods investigation combined observational research, survey research, and archival research. The observational component involved a stratified probability (random) sample of 196 Chicago census tracts. A specially equipped sport utility vehicle was driven down each street in these tracts at the rate of 5 miles per hour. Two video recorders taped the blocks on both sides of the street, while two observers peered out the vehicle’s windows and recorded their observations in logs. The result was an observational record of 23,816 face blocks (the block on one side of the street is a face block). The observers recorded in their logs codes that indicated land use, traffic, physical conditions, and evidence of physical disorder (see Exhibit 7.3). The videotapes were sampled and then coded for 126 variables, including housing characteristics, businesses, and social interactions. Physical disorder was measured by counting such features as cigarettes or cigars in the street, garbage, empty beer bottles, graffiti, condoms, and syringes. Indicators of social disorder included adults loitering, drinking alcohol in public, fighting, and selling drugs.

Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) also measured crime levels with data from police records, census tract socioeconomic characteristics with census data, and resident attitudes and behavior with a survey. This study illustrates both the value of multiple methods and the technique of recording observations in a form from which quantitative data can be obtained. The systematic observations give us much greater confidence in the measurement of relative neighborhood disorder than we would have in unstructured descriptive reports or in responses of residents to survey questions. However, for some purposes, it might be more important to know how disordered the neighborhood is in the eyes of the residents, so interviews might be preferred or perhaps participant observation reports on “what it is really like.”
### EXHIBIT 7.3 Neighborhood Disorder Indicators Used in Systematic Observation Log

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

INTENSIVE INTERVIEWING

Asking questions is part of almost all participant observation (Wolcott 1995: 102–105). Many qualitative researchers employ intensive interviewing exclusively, without systematic observation of respondents in their natural setting. Unlike the more structured interviewing that may be used in survey research (discussed in chapter 6), intensive interviewing relies on open-ended questions. Qualitative researchers do not presume to know the range of answers that respondents might give, and they seek to hear these answers in the respondents’ own words. Rather than asking standard questions in a fixed order, intensive interviewers allow the specific content and order of questions to vary from one interviewee to another.

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

Random selection is rarely used to select respondents for intensive interviews, but the selection method still must be considered carefully. Researchers should try to select interviewees who are knowledgeable about the subject of the interview, who are open to talking, and who represent the range of perspectives (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 65–92). Selection of new interviewees should continue, if possible, at least until the saturation point is reached, the point when new interviews seem to yield little additional information (see Exhibit 7.4). As new issues are uncovered, additional interviewees may be selected to represent different opinions about these issues.

Research by Fleury-Steiner (2003) that examines the thoughts and emotions of jurors in death penalty cases is an excellent illustration of the tremendous insights that can be uncovered through intensive interviewing. In *Jurors’ Stories of Death*, Fleury-Steiner reports on his work with the Capital Jury Project (CJP), which was a national study of the experiences of citizens who served as jurors on death penalty cases. To encourage respondents to tell stories about their experiences, the CJP survey explicitly asked jurors to tell interviewers about important moments during the trial and deliberations, and their impressions of the defendant. Fleury-Steiner states, “The goal of these questions was to facilitate jurors to construct their responses in their own ways...Given the leeway to answer as they saw fit, in many instances jurors’ stories emerged when I least expected them to” (2003: 44).

Establishing and Maintaining a Partnership

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

But the intensive interviewer’s relationship with the interviewee is not an equal partnership, for the researcher seeks to gain certain types of information and strategizes throughout to maintain an appropriate relationship (Kvale 1996: 6). In the first few minutes of the interview, the goal is to show interest in the interviewee and to clearly explain the purpose of the interview (Kvale 1996: 128). During the interview, the interviewer should maintain an appropriate distance from the interviewee, one that does not violate cultural norms; the interviewer should maintain eye contact and not engage in distracting behavior. An appropriate pace is also important; pause to allow the interviewee to reflect, elaborate, and generally not feel rushed (Gordon 1992). When an interview covers emotional or otherwise stressful topics, at the end the interviewer should give the interviewee an opportunity to unwind (Rubin & Rubin 1995: 138).

**Asking Questions and Recording Answers**

Intensive interviewers must plan their main questions around an outline of the interview topic. The questions should generally be short and to the point. More details can then be elicited through nondirective probes (such as “Can you tell me more about that?”), and follow-up questions can be tailored to answers to the main questions. Interviewers should strategize throughout an interview about how best to achieve their objectives while taking into account interviewees’ answers.
Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) interview narrative illustrates this well:

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

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

Do you see how the interviewer actively encouraged the subject to elaborate on answers? More importantly, intensive interviews can also uncover true meanings that questions utilizing fixed formats would surely miss.

Tape recorders commonly are used to record intensive interviews. Most researchers who have tape-recorded interviews feel that they do not inhibit most interviewees and, in fact, are routinely ignored. The occasional respondent who is very concerned with his or her public image may speak “for the tape recorder,” but such individuals are unlikely to speak frankly in any research interview. In any case, constant note-taking during an interview prevents adequate displays of interest and appreciation by the interviewer and hinders the degree of concentration that results in the best interviews.

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are groups of unrelated individuals which are formed by a researcher and then led in group discussion of a topic. The researcher asks specific questions and guides the discussion to ensure that group members address these questions, but the resulting information is qualitative and relatively unstructured. Unlike most other survey designs, focus groups do not involve representative samples; instead, a few individuals are recruited for the group who have the time to participate and who share key characteristics with the target population.
Most focus groups involve 7 to 10 people, a number that facilitates discussion by all in attendance. Although participants usually do not know one another, they are chosen so that they are relatively homogeneous, which tends to reduce their inhibitions in discussion. (Some researchers conduct discussion among groups of people who know one another, which may further reduce inhibitions.) Of course, the characteristics of individuals that determine their inclusion are based on the researcher’s conception of the target population for the study. Focus group leaders must begin the discussion by creating the expectation that all will participate and that the researcher will not favor any particular perspective or participant.

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

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

ANALYZING QUALITATIVE DATA

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

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

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

We want to reiterate the narrative from Venkatesh’s (2000) study of gang life in a Chicago public housing project because it vividly illustrates how progressive focusing affects the entire research process as well:

[The African-American youth] read my survey instrument, informed me that “I was not going to learn shit by asking these questions,” and said I would need to “hang out with them” if I really wanted to understand the experiences of African-American youth in the city. Over the next few months, I met with many of them informally to play racquetball, drink beer on the shores of Lake Michigan, attend their parties, and eat dinner with the families . . . Their views of life, getting ahead in America, the status of blacks, and “gangland” challenged some of my preconceived notions about these topics. (2000: xiv)

Qualitative Data Analysis as an Art

If you find yourself longing for the certainty of predefined measures and deductively derived hypotheses, you are beginning to understand the difference between setting out to analyze data quantitatively and planning to do so with a qualitative approach in mind. Or maybe you are now appreciating better the contrast between the positivist and interpretivist research philosophies that were summarized in chapter 2. Actually, the process of qualitative data analysis is even described by some as involving as much “art” as science, as a “dance,” in the words of Miller and Crabtree (1999b). In this artful way, analyzing text involves both inductive and deductive processes. The researcher generates concepts and linkages between them based on reading the text and also checks the text to see whether those concepts and interpretations are reflected in it.

Qualitative Compared With Quantitative Data Analysis

With these points in mind, let us review the ways in which qualitative data analysis differs from quantitative analysis (Denzin & Lincoln 2000a: 8–10; Patton 2002: 13–14).

- a focus on meanings rather than on quantifiable phenomena;
- collection of many data on a few cases rather than few data on many cases;
- study in depth and detail, without predetermined categories or directions, rather than emphasis on analyses and categories determined in advance;
- conception of the researcher as an “instrument,” rather than as the designer of objective instruments to measure particular variables;
- sensitivity to context rather than seeking universal generalizations;
- attention to the impact of the researcher’s and others’ values on the course of the analysis rather than presuming the possibility of value-free inquiry;
- a goal of rich descriptions of the world rather than measurement of specific variables.
You will also want to keep in mind features of qualitative data analysis that are shared with those of quantitative data analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative data analysis can involve making distinctions about textual data. You also know that textual data can be transposed to quantitative data through a process of categorization and counting. Some qualitative analysts also share with quantitative researchers a positivist goal of describing better the world as it “really” is, but others have adopted a postmodern goal of trying to understand how different people see and make sense of the world, without believing that there is any “correct” description.

TECHNIQUES OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

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

- documentation of the data and the process of data collection;
- organization or categorization of the data into concepts;
- connection of the data to show how one concept may influence another;
- corroboration or legitimization, by evaluating alternative explanations, disconfirming evidence, and searching for negative cases; and
- representing the account (reporting the findings).

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

An interim stage may consist of listing the concepts reflected in the notes and diagramming the relationships among concepts (Maxwell 1996: 78–81). In a large project, weekly team meetings are an important part of this process. Miller (1999) described this process in her study of neighborhood police officers. Miller’s research team met both to go over their field notes and to resolve points of confusion, as well as to dialogue with other skilled researchers who helped to identify emerging concepts:

The fieldwork team met weekly to talk about situations that were unclear and to troubleshoot any problems. We also made use of peer-debriefing techniques. Here, multiple colleagues, who were familiar with qualitative data analysis but not involved in our research, participated in preliminary analysis of our findings. (1999: 233)

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

As we noted earlier, the data for a qualitative study most often are notes jotted down in the field or during an interview—from which the original comments, observations, and feelings are reconstructed—or text transcribed from audiotapes. “The basic data are these observations and conversations, the actual words of people reproduced to the best of my ability from the field notes” (Diamond 1992: 7). What to do with all this material? Many field research projects have slowed to a halt because a novice researcher becomes overwhelmed by the quantity of information that has been collected. A one-hour interview can generate 20 to 25 pages of single-spaced text (Kvale 1996: 169). Analysis is less daunting, however, if the researcher maintains a disciplined transcription schedule.

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

Making Sense of It: Conceptualization, Coding, and Categorizing

Identifying and refining important concepts is a key part of the iterative process of qualitative research. Sometimes conceptualizing begins with a simple observation that is interpreted directly, “pulled apart,” and then put back together more meaningfully. Stake (1995) provides an example:

More often, analytic insights are tested against new observations, the initial statement of problems and concepts is refined, the researcher then collects more data, interacts with the data again, and the process continues.

Miller (2000) provides an excellent illustration of this iterative process of conceptualization in her study of girls in gangs:

I paid close attention to and took seriously respondents’ reactions to themes raised in interviews, particularly instances in which they “talked back” by labeling a topic irrelevant, pointing out what they saw as misinterpretations on my part, or offering corrections. In my research, the women talked back the most in response to my efforts to get them to articulate how gender inequality shaped their experiences in the gang. Despite stories they told to the contrary, many maintained a strong belief in their equality within the gang . . . As the research progressed, I also took emerging themes back to respondents in subsequent interviews to see if they felt I had gotten it right. In addition to conveying that I was interested in their perspectives and experiences, this process also proved useful for further refining my analyses. (2000: 30)
The process described in this quote illustrates the reflexive nature of qualitative data collection and analysis. In qualitative research, the collection of data and their analysis are not typically mutually exclusive activities. This excerpt shows how the researcher first was alerted to a concept by observations in the field, then refined her understanding of this concept by investigating its meaning. By observing the concept’s frequency of use, she came to realize its importance. Then she incorporated the concept into an explanatory model of student–patient relationships.

Examining Relationships and Displaying Data

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

Exhibit 7.5 provides an excellent example of a causal model developed by Baskin and Sommers (1998) to explain the desistance process for the sample of violent female offenders they interviewed in the state of New York. They described the process for the women who made it out of their lives of crime as follows:

Desistance is a process as complex and lengthy as the process of initial involvement. It was interesting to find that some of the key concepts in initiation of deviance—social bonding, differential association, deterrence, age—were equally important in the process of desistance. We see the aging offender take the threat of punishment seriously, reestablish links with conventional society and sever associations with subcultural street elements. We found, too, that the decision to give up crime was triggered by a shock of some sort that was followed by a period of crisis. Anxious and dissatisfied, the women took stock of their lives and criminal activity. They arrived at a point at which the deviant way of life seemed senseless. (1998: 139)

Authenticating Conclusions

No set standards exist for evaluating the validity or “authenticity” of conclusions in a qualitative study, but the need to consider carefully the evidence and methods on which conclusions are based is just as great as with other types of research.

A qualitative researcher’s conclusions should be assessed by his ability to provide a credible explanation for some aspect of social life. That explanation should capture group members’ tacit knowledge of the social processes that were observed, not just their verbal statements about these processes. Tacit knowledge, “the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances,” is reflected in participants’ actions as well as their words and in what they fail to state but nonetheless feel deeply and even take for granted (Altheide & Johnson 1994: 492–493). These features are evident in Whyte’s (1955) analysis of Cornerville social patterns.
Comparing conclusions from a qualitative research project to those obtained by other researchers conducting similar projects can also increase confidence in their authenticity. Susan Miller’s (1999) study of neighborhood police officers (NPOs) found striking parallels in the ways they defined their masculinity to processes reported in research about males in nursing and other traditionally female jobs:

In part, male NPOs construct an exaggerated masculinity so that they are not seen as feminine as they carry out the social-work functions of policing. Related to this is the almost defiant expression of heterosexuality, so that the men’s sexual orientation can never truly be doubted even if their gender roles are contested. Male patrol officers’ language—such as their use of terms like “pansy police” to connote neighborhood police officers—served to affirm their own

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EXHIBIT 7.5 The Desistance Process for Violent Female Offenders (Baskin & Sommers 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 1: Problems Associated With Criminal Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Socially Disjunctive Experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hitting rock bottom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiredness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delayed Deterrence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased probability of punishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased difficulty in “doing time”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased severity of sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing fear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reappraisal of life and goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychic change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision to quit or initial attempts at desistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuing possibility of criminal participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 2: Restructuring of Self</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public pronouncement of decision to end criminal participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claim to a new identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage 3: Maintenance of the Decision to Stop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to successfully renegotiate identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of significant others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integration into new social networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ties to conventional roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabilization of new social identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

heterosexuality. In addition, the male officers, but not the women, deliberately wove their heterosexual status into conversations, explicitly mentioning their female domestic partner or spouse and their children. This finding is consistent with research conducted in the occupational field. The studies reveal that men in female-dominated occupations, such as teachers, librarians, and pediatricians, over-reference their heterosexual status to ensure that others will not think they are gay. (1999: 222)

**Reflexivity**

Confidence in the conclusions from a field research study is also strengthened by an honest and informative account about how the researcher interacted with subjects in the field, what problems she encountered, and how these problems were or were not resolved. Such a "natural history" of the development of the evidence, sometimes termed reflexivity, enables others to evaluate the findings. Such an account is important first and foremost because of the evolving and variable nature of field research: To an important extent, the researcher "makes up" the method in the context of a particular investigation rather than applying standard procedures that are specified before the investigation begins.

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

**ALTERNATIVES IN QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS**

The qualitative data analyst can choose from many interesting alternative approaches. Of course, the research question under investigation should shape the selection of an analytic approach, but the researcher's preferences and experiences inevitably also will have an important influence on the method chosen. The alternative approaches we present here—ethnography, ethnomethodology, qualitative comparative analysis, narrative analysis, conversation analysis, case-oriented understanding, and grounded theory—give you a good sense of the different possibilities (Patton 2002).

**Ethnography**

*Ethnography* is the study of a culture or cultures that a group of people share (Van Maanen 1995: 4). As a method, it usually is meant to refer to the process of participant observation by a single investigator who immerses himself or herself in the group for a long period of time (often one or more years). Ethnographic research can also be called "naturalistic,"
because it seeks to describe and understand the natural social world as it really is, in all its richness and detail. There are no particular methodological techniques associated with ethnography, other than just “being there.” The analytic process relies on the thoroughness and insight of the researcher to “tell it like it is” in the setting, as he or she experienced it.

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

My primary aim in this work is to render ethnographically the social and cultural dynamics of the interpersonal violence that is currently undermining the quality of life of too many urban neighborhoods . . . How do the people of the setting perceive their situation? What assumptions do they bring to their decision making? (1999: 10–11)

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

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

When a young life is cut down, almost everyone goes into mourning. The first thing that happens is that a crowd gathers about the site of the shooting or the incident. The police then arrive, drawing more of a crowd. Since such a death often occurs close to the victim’s house, his mother or his close relatives and friends may be on the scene of the killing. When they arrive, the women and girls often wail and moan, crying out their grief for all to hear, while the young men simply look on, in studied silence . . . Soon the ambulance arrives. (1999: 138)

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

The “code of the street” is not the goal or product of any individual’s action but is the fabric of everyday life, a vivid and pressing milieu within which all local residents must shape their personal routines, income strategies, and orientations to schooling, as well as their mating, parenting, and neighbor relations. (1999: 326)

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

Ethnomethodology focuses on the way that participants construct the social world in which they live—how they “create reality”—rather than on describing the social world itself. In fact, ethnomethodologists do not necessarily believe that we can find an objective reality; it is the way that participants come to create and sustain a sense of “reality” that is of interest. In the words of Gubrium and Holstein (1997), in ethnomethodology, as compared to the naturalistic orientation of ethnography, “The focus shifts from the scenic features of everyday life onto the ways through which the world comes to be experienced as real, concrete, factual, and ‘out there.’ An interest in members’ methods of constituting their world supersedes the naturalistic project of describing members’ worlds as they know them.” (1997: 41)

Unlike the ethnographic analyst, who seeks to describe the social world as the participants see it, the ethnomethodological analyst seeks to maintain some distance from that world. The ethnomethodologist views a “code” of conduct like that described by Anderson (2003) not as a description of a real normative force that constrains social action, but as the way that people in the setting create a sense of order and social structure (Gubrium & Holstein 1997: 44–45). The ethnomethodologist focuses on how reality is constructed, not on what it is.

Qualitative Comparative Analysis

In previous chapters, we have discussed many studies that have attempted to explain violent crime. Another novel approach to the study of violence, specifically of homicide, was recently undertaken by Miethe, Regoeczi, and Drass (2004). In their book Rethinking Homicide, instead of focusing on the victim or the offender, they analyze the homicide situation as the unit of analysis, exploring the structure and process underlying the lethal outcome. They state, “Homicide situations are defined by the nexus of offender, victim, and offense elements in time and space. It is the combination of these elements, not their operation in isolation, which provides the context for lethal violence” (2004: xvii).

To analyze the homicide narratives from cases from four large cities in the United States, Miethe and colleagues used qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). They describe why QCA was the most appropriate methodology for their study:

As an analytical method for case comparisons, QCA considers cases holistically, as complex configurations of attributes measured by a set of variables. It also assumes that events or outcomes are produced by variables acting together in combination. (Miethe et al., 2004: 50)

It is beyond the scope of this book to detail the process of QCA here. Readers who want more information should seek other sources (e.g., Amenta & Poulsen 1994). QCA actually combines elements of quantitative and qualitative analysis, and as such is a hybrid of sorts. For example, similar to a statistical analysis, QCA requires the specification of a model relating a set of independent variables to an outcome variable. But it examines the data holistically by developing typologies across a complex arrangement of cases and variables.
After their QCA analysis of over 400,000 homicides, Miethe and colleagues (2004) concluded that most homicides occur in situational contexts that have changed little over the past three decades. They found expressive homicides involving disputes and arguments to be more prevalent than instrumental homicides, with males being the primary perpetrators of both, but particularly of instrumental homicides. Like other research, they found that these conflicts often involved what many would call “trivial altercations” where alcohol was involved and where the victim often provoked the offender in some way (e.g., with an insult). This was particularly true for youth homicides, many of which contained elements of honor contests and issues of respect.

**Narrative Analysis**

Narrative “displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes” (Richardson 1995: 200). **Narrative analysis** focuses on “the story itself” and seeks to preserve the integrity of personal biographies or a series of events that cannot adequately be understood in terms of their discrete elements (Riessman 2002: 218). The coding for a narrative analysis is typically of the narratives as a whole, rather than of the different elements within them. The coding strategy revolves around reading the stories and classifying them into general patterns.

For example, Morrill et al. (2000: 534) read through 254 conflict narratives written by the ninth graders they studied and found four different types of stories:

1. **action tales**, in which the author represents himself or herself and others as acting within the parameters of taken-for-granted assumptions about what is expected for particular roles among peers;
2. **expressive tales**, in which the author focuses on strong, negative emotional responses to someone who has wronged him or her;
3. **moral tales**, in which the author recounts explicit norms that shaped his or her behavior in the story and influenced the behavior of others; and
4. **rational tales**, in which the author represents him- or herself as a rational decision maker navigating through the events of the story.4

Morrill et al. (2000: 553) summarize their classification of the youth narratives in a simple table that highlights the frequency of each type of narrative and the characteristics associated with each of them. How does such an analysis contribute to our understanding of youth violence? Morrill and colleagues first emphasize that their narratives “suggest that consciousness of conflict among youths—like that among adults—is not a singular entity, but comprises a rich and diverse range of perspectives” (2000: 551).

In this way, Morrill et al.’s (2000) narrative analysis allowed an understanding of youth conflict to emerge from the youths’ own stories while also informing our understanding of broader social theories and processes.
Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis is a specific qualitative method for analyzing ordinary conversation. Unlike narrative analysis, it focuses on the sequence and details of conversational interaction, rather than on the “stories” that people are telling. Like ethnomethodology (from which it developed), conversation analysis focuses on how reality is constructed, rather than on what it is. Three premises guide conversation analysis (Gubrium & Holstein 2000: 492):

1. Interaction is sequentially organized, and talk can be analyzed in terms of the process of social interaction rather than in terms of motives or social status.
2. Talk, as a process of social interaction, is contextually oriented; it is both shaped by interaction and creates the social context of that interaction.
3. These processes are involved in all social interaction, so no interactive details are irrelevant to understanding it.

Consider these premises as you read the following dialogue between British researcher Ann Phoenix (2003) and a boy she called “Thomas” in her study of notions of masculinity, bullying, and academic performance among 11- to 14-year-old boys in 12 London schools.

**Thomas:** It’s your attitude, but some people are bullied for no reason whatsoever just because other people are jealous of them . . .

**Q:** How do they get bullied?

**Thomas:** There’s a boy in our year called James, and he’s really clever and he’s basically got no friends, and that’s really sad because . . . He gets top marks in every test and everyone hates him. I mean, I like him. (2003: 235)

Do you see how Thomas’s presentation of himself reflected his interchange with the researcher as she probed his orientation? Do you imagine that his talk would have been quite different if this conversation had been with other boys?

Case-Oriented Understanding

A case-oriented understanding attempts to understand a phenomenon from the standpoint of the participants. The case-oriented understanding method reflects an interpretive research philosophy that is not geared to identifying causes but provides a different way to explain social phenomena. For example, Fischer and Wertz (2002) constructed such an explanation of the effect of being criminally victimized. They first recounted crime victims’ stories and then identified common themes in these stories.

Their explanation began with a description of what they termed the process of “living routinely” before the crime: “He/she . . . feels that the defended against crime could never happen to him/her. I said, ‘nah, you’ve got to be kidding.’”

In a second stage, “being disrupted,” the victim copes with the discovered crime and fears worst outcomes: “You imagine the worst when it’s happening . . . I just kept thinking my baby’s upstairs.” In a later stage, “reintegrating,” the victim begins to assimilate the violation
by taking some protective action: “But I clean out my purse now since then and I leave very little of that kind of stuff in there.”

Finally, when the victim is “going on,” he or she reflects on the changes the crime produced: “I don’t think it made me stronger. It made me smarter.”

You can see how Fischer and Wertz (2002: 288–290) constructed an explanation of the effect of crime on its victims through this analysis of the process of responding to the experience. This effort to “understand” what happened in these cases gives us a much better sense of why things happened as they did.

**Grounded Theory**

Theory development occurs continually in qualitative data analysis (Coffey & Atkinson 1996: 23). The goal of many qualitative researchers is to create **grounded theory**—that is, to inductively build up a systematic theory that is “grounded” in, or based on, the observations. The observations are summarized into conceptual categories, which are tested directly in the research setting with more observations. Over time, as the conceptual categories are refined and linked, a theory evolves (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Huberman & Miles 1994: 436). Exhibit 7.6 illustrates this process.

As observation, interviewing, and reflection continue, researchers refine their definitions of problems and concepts, and select indicators. They can then check the frequency and distribution of phenomena: How many people made a particular type of comment? How often did social interaction lead to arguments? Social system models may then be developed, which specify the relationships among different phenomena. These models are modified as researchers gain experience in the setting. For the final analysis, the researchers check their models carefully against their notes and make a concerted attempt to discover negative evidence that might suggest the model is incorrect.
VISUAL SOCIOLOGY

For about 150 years, people have been creating a record of the social world with photography. This creates the possibility of “observing” the social world through photographs and films and of interpreting the resulting images as a “text.” It is no surprise that visual sociology has been developed as a method both to learn how others “see” the social world and to create images of it for further study. As in the analysis of written text, however, the visual sociologist must be sensitive to the way in which a photograph or film “constructs” the reality that it depicts.

An analysis by Margolis (2004) of photographic representations of American Indian boarding schools provides an idea of the value of analysis of photographs (see Exhibit 7.7). On the left is a picture taken in 1886 of Chiricahua Apaches who had just arrived at the Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. The school was run by a Captain Richard Pratt who, like many Americans in that period, felt tribal societies were communistic, indolent, dirty, and ignorant, while Western civilization was industrious and individualistic. So Captain Pratt set out to acculturate American Indians to the dominant culture. The second picture shows the result: the same group of Apaches looking like Europeans, not Native Americans, dressed in standard uniforms, with standard haircuts, and with more standard posture.

Many other pictures display the same type of transformation. Are these pictures each “worth a thousand words?” They capture the ideology of the school management, but we can be less certain that they document accurately the “before and after” status of the students.

Captain Pratt “consciously used photography to represent the boarding school mission as successful” (Margolis 2004: 79). While he clearly tried to ensure a high degree of conformity, there were accusations that the contrasting images were exaggerated to overemphasize the change (Margolis 2004: 78). Reality was being constructed, not just depicted, in these photographs.

EXHIBIT 7.7  Pictures of Chiricahua Apache Children Before and After Starting Carlisle Indian School, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 1886

Chiricahua Apache Children Upon Arrival at Carlisle School.  
Chiricahua Apache Children After 4 Months at Carlisle School.

Visual sociology will certainly become an increasingly important aspect of qualitative analyses of social settings and the people in them. The result will be richer descriptions of the social world, but whether you examine or also produce pictures for such analyses, remember Darren Newbury’s (2005) reminder to readers of his journal, *Visual Studies*, that “images cannot be simply taken of the world, but have to be made within it” (2005: 1). Pictures, like other “text,” are partly a social construction.

**Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis**

The analysis process can be enhanced in various ways by using a computer. Programs designed for qualitative data can speed up the analysis process, make it easier for researchers to experiment with different codes, test different hypotheses about relationships, and facilitate diagrams of emerging theories and preparation of research reports (Coffey & Atkinson 1996; Richards & Richards 1994). The steps involved in computer-assisted qualitative data analysis parallel those used traditionally to analyze such text as notes, documents, or interview transcripts: preparation, coding, analysis, and reporting.

We use two of the most popular programs to illustrate these steps: HyperRESEARCH and QSR NVivo. (See the Student Study Site, www.sagepub.com/frccjstudy, for an extended introduction to HyperRESEARCH. The software itself and the HyperRESEARCH tutorials are found on the study site as well.)

Text preparation begins with typing or scanning text in a word processor or, with NVivo, directly into the program’s rich text editor. NVivo will create or import a rich text file. HyperRESEARCH requires that your text be saved as a text file (as “ASCII” in most word processors) before you transfer it into the analysis program. HyperRESEARCH expects your text data to be stored in separate files corresponding to each unique case, such as an interview with one subject.

Coding the text involves categorizing particular text segments. This is the foundation of much qualitative analysis. Either program allows you to assign a code to any segment of text (in NVivo, you drag through the characters to select them; in HyperRESEARCH, you click on the first and last words to select text). You can make up codes as you go through a document and also assign codes that you have already developed to text segments. You can also have the programs “autocode” text by identifying a word or phrase that should always receive the same code, or, in NVivo, by coding each section identified by the style of the rich text document, for example, each question or speaker (of course, you should check carefully the results of autocoding). Both programs also let you examine the coded text “in context,” embedded in its place in the original document.

Analysis focuses on reviewing cases or text segments with similar codes and examining relationships among different codes. You may decide to combine codes into larger concepts. You may specify additional codes to capture more fully the variation among cases. You can test hypotheses about relationships among codes.

Reports from both programs can include text to illustrate the cases, codes, and relationships that you specify. You can also generate counts of code frequencies and then import these counts into a statistical program for quantitative analysis. However, the many types of analyses and reports that can be developed with qualitative analysis software do not lessen the need for a careful evaluation of the quality of the data on which conclusions are based.
In reality, using a qualitative data analysis computer program is not always as straightforward as it appears. Scott Decker and Barrik Van Winkle (1996) describe the difficulty they faced in using a computer program to identify instances of the concept of “drug sales”:

The software we used is essentially a text retrieval package . . . One of the dilemmas faced in the use of such software is whether to employ a coding scheme within the interviews or simply to leave them as unmarked text. We chose the first alternative, embedding conceptual tags at the appropriate points in the text. An example illustrates this process. One of the activities we were concerned with was drug sales. Our first chore (after a thorough reading of all the transcripts) was to use the software to “isolate” all of the transcript sections dealing with drug sales.

One way to do this would be to search the transcripts for every instance in which the word “drugs” was used. However, such a strategy would have the disadvantages of providing information of too general a character while often missing important statements about drugs. Searching on the word “drugs” would have produced a file including every time the word was used, whether it was in reference to drug sales, drug use, or drug availability—clearly more information than we were interested in. However, such a search would have failed to find all of the slang used to refer to drugs (“boy” for heroin, “Casper” for crack cocaine) as well as the more common descriptions of drugs, especially rock or crack cocaine. (1996: 53–54)

Decker and Van Winkle solved this problem by parenthetically inserting conceptual tags in the text whenever talk of drug sales was found. This process allowed them to examine all the statements made by gang members about a single concept (drug sales). As you can imagine, though, this still left the researchers with many pages of transcripts material to analyze.

**Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research can raise some complex ethical issues. No matter how hard the field researcher strives to study the social world naturally, leaving no traces, the very act of research itself imposes something unnatural on the situation. It is up to the researchers to identify and take responsibility for the consequences of their involvement. Four main ethical issues arise: voluntary participation, subject wellbeing, identity disclosure, and confidentiality.

**Voluntary Participation**

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

The issue of voluntary participation is particularly important when interviewing or observing minors. At what age can individuals validly give their voluntary consent to participate in a project? It is customary for human subjects committees to want the consent of parents when their children are participating in research. This requirement poses a problem for research that may be investigating issues that parents or guardians may not want uncovered, such as abuse or neglect. In other instances, alerting parents or guardians about the nature of the study may compromise the confidentiality of the participants. For example, if Decker and Van Winkle (1996) had been forced to obtain parental approval for their gang member interviews, it would have violated the confidentiality they tried to provide to their respondents. To assure the human subjects committee that their participants understood their rights, Decker and Van Winkle obtained an advocate for each juvenile member of their sample. This advocate was responsible for making sure that the juveniles each understood their right to refuse or quit the interview at any time without penalty and the confidential nature of the project. Only after these issues were carefully explained did the participant sign a consent form.

**Subject Wellbeing**

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

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

> It was a difficult decision to make because I had struggled for so long to locate gang girls in Columbus [Missouri]. Ultimately, I believe it was the right thing to do. My presence had stirred up trouble for the agency, and I had an ethical obligation to back away, regardless of the cost to me. (2000: 26)
Identity Disclosure

We have considered already the problems of identity disclosure, particularly in the case of covert participation. But how much disclosure about the study is necessary, and how hard should researchers try to make sure that their research purposes are understood? Less-educated subjects may not readily comprehend what a researcher is or be able to weigh the possible consequences of the research for themselves. Should researchers inform subjects if the study’s interests and foci change while it is in progress? Current ethical standards require informed consent of research subjects; can this standard be met in any meaningful way if researchers do not fully disclose their identity? But isn’t some degree of dissimulation a natural part of social life (Punch 1994: 91)? Can a balance be struck between the disclosure of critical facts and a coherent research strategy?

Confidentiality

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

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

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

Ethics in Qualitative Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data also poses ethical issues. Miles and Huberman (1994: 293–295) suggest several specific questions that are of particular importance during the process of data analysis:
Intervention and advocacy. “What do I do when I see harmful, illegal, or wrongful behavior on the part of others during a study? Should I speak for anyone’s interests besides my own? If so, whose interests do I advocate?” Maintaining what is called “guilty knowledge” may force the researcher to suppress some parts of the analysis so as not to disclose the wrongful behavior, but presenting “what really happened” in a report may prevent ongoing access and violate understandings with participants.

Research integrity and quality. “Is my study being conducted carefully, thoughtfully, and correctly in terms of some reasonable set of standards?” Real analyses have real consequences, so you owe it to yourself and those you study to adhere strictly to the analysis methods that you believe will produce authentic, valid conclusions.

Ownership of data and conclusions. “Who owns my field notes and analyses: I, my organization, my funders? And once my reports are written, who controls their diffusion?” Of course, these concerns arise in any social research project, but the intimate involvement of the qualitative researcher with participants in the setting studied makes conflicts of interest between different stakeholders much more difficult to resolve. Working through the issues as they arise is essential.

Use and misuse of results. “Do I have an obligation to help my findings be used appropriately? What if they are used harmfully or wrongly?” It is prudent to develop understandings early in the project with all major stakeholders that specify what actions will be taken in order to encourage appropriate use of project results and to respond to what is considered misuse of these results.

CONCLUSION

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

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

Even if qualitative researchers made an effort to replicate key studies, their notion of developing and grounding explanations inductively in the observations made in a particular setting would hamper comparison of findings. Measurement reliability is thereby hindered, as are systematic tests for the validity of key indicators and formal tests for causal connections.
In the final analysis, qualitative research involves a mode of thinking and investigating different from that used in experimental and survey research. Qualitative research is inductive and idiographic; experiments and surveys tend to be conducted in a deductive, quantitative framework. Both approaches can help social scientists learn about the social world; the proficient researcher must be ready to use either. Qualitative data are often supplemented with many quantitative characteristics or activities. And, as you have already seen, quantitative data are often enriched with written comments and observations, and focus groups have become a common tool of survey researchers seeking to develop their questionnaires. Thus the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research techniques is not always clear-cut.

**KEY TERMS**

| Case-oriented understanding | Jottings |
| Complete observation | Matrix |
| Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis | Narrative analysis |
| Conversation analysis | Participant observation |
| Covert (complete) participation | Progressive focusing |
| Documentation | Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) |
| Ethnography | Qualitative methods |
| Ethnomethodology | Reactive effect |
| Experience sampling method (ESM) | Reflexivity |
| Field notes | Saturation point |
| Field research | Systematic observation |
| Focus group | Tacit knowledge |
| Grounded theory | Theoretical sampling |
| Intensive interviewing | Thick description |

**HIGHLIGHTS**

- Qualitative researchers tend to develop ideas inductively, try to understand the social context and sequential nature of attitudes and actions, and explore the subjective meanings that participants attach to events. They rely primarily on participant observation, intensive interviewing, and, in recent years, focus groups.

- Participant observers may adopt one of several roles for a particular research project. Each role represents a different balance between observing and participating, which may or may not include public acknowledgment of the researcher's real identity. Many field researchers prefer a moderate role, participating as well as observing in a group but publicly acknowledging the researcher role.

- Field researchers must develop strategies for entering the field, developing and maintaining relations in the field, sampling, and recording and analyzing data.

- Recording and analyzing notes is a crucial step in field research. Detailed notes should be recorded and analyzed daily to refine methods and to develop concepts, indicators, and models of the social system observed.
• Intensive interviews involve open-ended questions and follow-up probes, with the content and order of specific questions varying from one interview to the next.
• Focus groups combine elements of participant observation and intensive interviewing. They can increase the validity of attitude measurement by revealing what people say when presenting their opinions in a group context.
• Case studies use thick description and other qualitative techniques to provide a holistic picture of a setting or group.
• Narrative analysis attempts to understand a life or a series of events as they unfolded, in a meaningful progression.
• Grounded theory connotes a general explanation that develops in interaction with the data and is continually tested and refined as data collection continues.
• The four main ethical issues in field research concern voluntary participation, subject wellbeing, identity disclosure, and confidentiality.

EXERCISES

Discussing Research

1. Review the experiments and surveys described in previous chapters. Choose one and propose a field research design that would focus on the same research question but with participant observation techniques in a local setting. Propose the role that you would play in the setting, along the participant observation continuum, and explain why you would favor this role. Describe the stages of your field research study, including your plans for entering the field, developing and maintaining relationships, sampling, and recording and analyzing data. Then discuss what you would expect your study to add to the findings resulting from the study described in the book.

2. Develop an interview guide that focuses on a research question addressed in one of the studies in this book. Using this guide, conduct an intensive interview with one person who is involved with the topic in some way. Take only brief notes during the interview, and then write as complete a record of the interviews as you can immediately afterward. Turn in an evaluation of your performance as an interviewer and note-taker, together with your notes.

3. Find the Qualitative Research lesson in the interactive exercises on the Student Study Site, www.sagepub.com/frccjstudy. Answer the questions in this lesson in order to review the types of ethical issues that can arise in the course of participant observation research.

Finding Research

1. Go to the Annual Review of Sociology’s website by following the publication link at http://soc.AnnualReviews.org. Search for articles that use field research as the primary method of gathering data on gangs or delinquency. Find at least three articles and report on the specific method of field research used in each.

2. Search the web for information on focus groups (previous, upcoming, or ongoing) involving victims, offenders, fear of crime, crime prevention, or another criminological
Critiquing Research

1. Read and summarize one of the qualitative studies discussed in this chapter or another classic study recommended by your instructor. Review and critique the study using the article review questions presented in Appendix B. What questions are answered by the study? What questions are raised for further investigation?

2. Read the complete text of one of the qualitative studies presented in this chapter and evaluate its conclusions for authenticity, using the criteria in this chapter.

3. Review one of the articles on the book Study Site, www.sagepub.com/frccjstudy, that used qualitative methods. Describe the data that were collected, and identify the steps used in the analysis. What type of qualitative data analysis was this? If it is not one of the methods presented in this chapter, describe its similarities to and differences from one of these methods. How confident are you in the conclusions, given the methods of analysis used?

Developing a Research Proposal

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

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

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

Making Research Ethical

1. The April 1992 issue of the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography is devoted to a series of essays reevaluating Whyte’s (1943) classic field study, Street Corner Society. A social scientist interviewed some of the people described in Whyte’s book and concluded that the researcher had made methodological and ethical errors. Whyte and others offer able rejoinders and further commentary. Reading the entire issue of this journal will improve your appreciation of the issues that field researchers confront.

2. Covert participation may be the only way for researchers to observe the inner workings of some criminal or other deviant groups, but this strategy is likely to result in the researcher witnessing, and perhaps being asked to participate in, illegal acts. Do you think that covert participation is ever ethical? If so, under what conditions? Can the standards of “no harm to subjects,” “identity disclosure,” and “voluntary” participation be maintained in covert research?

3. A New York Times reporter (Wines 2006) recently talked about the dilemma many reporters have: whether or not to provide monetary or other compensation, like food or medical supplies, to people they interview for a story. In journalism, paying for information is a “cardinal sin” because journalists are “indoctrinated with the notion that they are observers.” They are trained to report on situations, but not to influence a situation. This is what many scholars believe a researcher’s role should be. Nevertheless, as we learned in this chapter, it is common in research to offer small gratuities for information and interviews. However, does paying for information unduly influence the truthfulness of the information being sought? What are your thoughts on paying for information? What if you were investigating the problems faced by families living below the poverty level and during an interview you noticed that the family refrigerator and cupboards were empty and the baby was crying from hunger? What is the ethical reaction? If you believe the most ethical response would be to provide food or money for food, is it fair that there is another family next door in the same condition who did not happen to be on your interview list? How should gratuities be handled?

Performing Data Analysis in SPSS

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

1. Describe the opinions about friends’ attitudes and personal misfortune based on the frequencies for these variables (V77; V79; V109; V119).

2. What explanation can you develop (inductively) for these attitudes? Do you believe that either friends’ attitudes toward delinquent acts or getting caught for committing a crime would influence behavior? Explain.
3. Propose a participant observation, a focus group, or an intensive interview study to explore these attitudes further. Identify the sample for the study, and describe how you would carry out your observations, focus groups, or interviews.

**Student Study Site**

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

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**NOTES**


