THE PRACTICE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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CHAPTER 2

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

PARADIGMS: WINDOWS INTO THE REALITY

Sociologist Joseph Diaz is a "classical" ethnographer trained in the positivist tradition. This tradition provides him with a ready-made "window" into how he approaches a research project. He wants to conduct a modern ethnography of a plasma-buying clinic located on the Las Vegas Strip. He begins his research project by noting:

I intended to write a colorful, but "classical" ethnography where I find causes, effects, and decipher the hidden codes of the plasma donors and workers. I think I owe this default approach to inquiry to my training as a quantitative methodologist, which teaches, within the positivist perspective, that there is a knowable reality. (Diaz, 1999, p. 1)

What Diaz soon finds out, much to his dismay, is that this window into the social world wasn't working for him:

In the early data gathering phase of this study, I had to admit that the "plasma experience" appeared neither homogeneous nor easily modeled as a finite and discrete set of causes and effects. When I noticed that my notes, thoughts, experiences, beliefs, and observations regarding my plasma-donating experiences were often contradictory with each other, I realized that my approach needed to be changed. In short, I sought to find a "Truth" which I soon realized does not exist in human interaction and experience... I tried, therefore to employ the approach that seemed
most appropriate to this confusing, and often self-contradictory practice of selling plasma: The Postmodern Ethnography. (Diaz, 1999, pp. 1–2)

The reality of events unfolding in the plasma clinic instead was highly "subjective," filled with contradiction, and Diaz soon finds himself playing a crucial role in the data gathering and interpretation of that world. As a participant observer he uncovers a series of "tales" of plasma donor experiences, including his own:

...in this study I accept the post modern notion that an author can never be truly objective...nor can the descriptions events, people, places, and situations be entirely "true," concretely factual, or objectively representative....Instead of attempting to remove myself (the author) from the study and pretend that my assumptions and interpretations of given events are correct and irrefutable, as one might in a "classical ethnography," I will instead make my presence in the study explicit and will respond to occurrences and evoke emotions and thoughts rather than try to define a given event or situation. (Diaz, 1999, p. 2)

Diaz started out his research project with a set of philosophical assumptions concerning the nature of the social world. These assumptions may often go unstated and unexamined, but they are crucial underpinnings to the research enterprise and help shape its process. The philosophical "substructure" of a research enterprise guides us and our interpretation of reality regarding some core metaphysical issues:

- What is the nature of social reality?
- What is the nature of the individual? (our concept of social reality/humanity or ontology)?
- How is knowledge constructed?
- Who can be a knower?
- What can be known? (our view of epistemology)?

How we answer these questions, in turn, affects how we engage methodologically (theoretically) with the concrete social world as well as the types of methods we consider appropriate for a research project.

Joseph Diaz is trained as a classical ethnographer working in the quantitative tradition. He is a positivist and as such he views the social world as ordered, knowable, and objective. As reviewed in Chapter 1, a qualitatively oriented researcher, on the other hand, possesses a different orientation and employs an "interpretative approach" to reality in which the goal is to understand the controllability of events" (Diaz, 1999, p. 2). Qualitatively:

- What kind of window...the researcher to the research process...is based.

The process of defining what questions are to be asked...is not equally clear. Becker (1963) suggests that the research questions are often generated in the interview process, whereas Corbin (1990) suggests that the researcher may have preconceived ideas of research questions.

A possible approach is to consider what questions (postposition) need to be asked (then proceed to their interpretation). This may be done through a process of bracketing or "clearing" one's own presuppositions as a researcher. This practice is likely to translate into one's methodological approach from the perspective of the field. Denzin (1970) notes that the researcher might adopt a "tales" approach, such as the one taken by Diaz, and organize...
understand and explore the nature of social life. Instead of “testing and controlling” events, as we first saw Joseph Diaz do as he applied “causes and effects” in order to comprehend the reality of the plasma donor clinic, a qualitative analyst asks questions such as:

- What meanings do individuals give to the nature of reality?
- How can we understand the variety of meanings individuals impart to the plasma donor experience?

Not all qualitative researchers approach their craft with exactly the same window into the social world. Instead, they come from a multitude of paradigmatic traditions. The “traditional” research paradigm Joseph Diaz started out with has its origins in the beginning of the 1900s and continues to operate to the present day. While we associate this paradigm with a quantitative approach to research, there are qualitative researchers whose research gains insights from this approach.

The positivist and postpositivist traditions linger like long shadows over the qualitative research project. Historically, qualitative research was defined within the positivist paradigm, where qualitative researchers attempted to do good positivist research with less rigorous methods and procedures. Some mid-20th century qualitative researchers (e.g., Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961) reported participant observation findings in terms of quasi-statistics. As recently as 1998, Strauss and Corbin, two leaders of grounded theory approach to qualitative research, attempted to modify the usual canons of good (positivist) science to fit their own post-positivist concept of rigorous research. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9)

A positivistic perspective looks at the concrete social reality as something “out there” waiting to be described and explained or at least approximated (postpositivist). In order to do so, the researchers should be “objective” in their interpretation of that reality; that is, not allow their values or attitudes or feelings to enter into the research process, by holding them in abeyance or “bracketing” these attitudes and values. The researched is often objectified as a research object. Classical ethnographers studying a community are most likely to treat villagers as “foreigners” or “the other” and to construct a story from the field that is thought to be an “objective” account of events in the field. Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) note that these accounts are often more like “tales” from the field that often reflect a given ethnographer’s attitudes, beliefs, and values (p. 14).
Returning home with his data, the Lone Ethnographer wrote up an objective account of the culture he studied. These accounts were structured by the norms of classical ethnography. This sacred bundle of terms (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 31) organized ethnographic texts in terms of four beliefs and commitments: a commitment to objectivism, a complicity with imperialism, a belief in monumentalism (the ethnography would create a museum like picture of the culture studied), and a belief in timelessness (what was studied never changed). This model of the researcher, who could also write complex, dense theories about what was studied, holds to the present day. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a, p. 14)

This traditional model has been rejected by a new generation of qualitative researchers who hold very different philosophical views on the nature of the social world. Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) note the importance of three “interpretative paradigms” in qualitative research: constructivist-interpretive, critical (Marxist, emancipatory), and feminist. Neuman (2003) also cites three types of qualitative paradigms that he terms positivism, interpretive, and critical (p. 83). Each of these paradigmatic approaches to research makes certain assumptions concerning the nature of reality and the individual (ontology), the type of theory (methodology) they employ, what can be known, and what constitutes knowledge (epistemology).

If I take a constructivist or interpretative approach to research I would assume a reality that is subjective and consists of stories or meanings produced or constructed by individuals within their “natural” settings. Constructivists, in particular, assert that there is no “objective” social reality, “out there” waiting to be found out. Miller and Crabtree (1999) note that interpretivists:

...trace their roots back to phenomenology (Schutz, 1967) and hermeneutics (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This tradition also recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning but doesn’t reject outright some notion of objectivity. Pluralism, not relativism, is stressed, with focus on the circular dynamic tension of subject and object. (p. 10)

A critical paradigm deals with how power, control, and ideology dominate our understanding of reality. The focus of research revolves around how power dynamics generate a given set of meanings (ideologies) about individuals' social reality and lived experiences. An example of work from this paradigm comes from postmodernist research, which questions the very foundation of what one means by “reality.” A postmodernist examines how social knowledge is created and how variation exists within cultural, historical, and geographical spaces for these knowledge systems. (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998a, p. 14)

Paradigm is another term for reality, and often used interchangeably.

We often ask questions that focus on how things are or ideas about how things are. Questions include:

- Why
- How

Research often begins with explaining, articulating, and determining; to describe; to note; to establish. The Guba et al. (1981) criteria for validity and “How well do these criteria apply to types of questions?”

The core question for the researcher, such as the question that researchers mean to answer, is how to articulate the idea of research results or finding and present them naturally.

The “context” is an “environment for the methods” (Creswell, 1998).
how social life is produced and privileged by those in power. The goal of knowledge building is to "emancipate" and to expose social injustice. Some variations on this paradigm are said to include Marxist, feminist, ethnic, cultural, and queer studies. Denzin and Lincoln pose a separate paradigm for these variations which they term a materialist-realist ontology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 21). Reality is viewed as "representational" rather than "real" or "the truth."

Paradigms or worldviews are neither right nor wrong; one way of seeing is another way of not seeing. But paradigms are powerful ways of looking at reality, and they provide windows into information about the social world and often frame the particular questions we seek to answer.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

We often think of qualitative questions involving an "inductive" approach, which focuses on describing (the "What" questions) or generating theories or ideas about a given social phenomenon. The researcher asks open-ended questions such as:

- What is happening here?
- How do individuals make sense of their lived experiences?

Research aims would be exploratory and descriptive: to discover, explain, and generate ideas/theories about the phenomenon under investigation; to understand and explain social patterns (the "How" questions). As Gubrium and Holstein (1997) note, there is a distinction between the "What" and "How" questions in qualitative research, and this can differentiate the types of qualitative paradigms described above.

The commanding focus of much qualitative research is on questions such as what is happening, what are people doing, and what does it mean to them? The what questions address the content of meaning as articulated through social interaction and as mediated by culture. The resulting research mandate is to describe reality in terms of what it naturally is. (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 14)

The "What" questions focus on individuals and social settings, "looking for the meanings that exist in, emerge from, and are consequential for, those settings" (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 14).
The "How" questions in qualitative research are different. They often set aside meaning and are interested in how meaning is constructed by respondents within a given setting:

... *bow* questions typically emphasize the production of meaning, research orients to the everyday practices through which the meaningful realities of everyday life are constituted and sustained. The guiding question is *bow* are the realities of everyday life accomplished? (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 14)

Does this mean that qualitative research questions do not tackle the "Why?" of social reality? Providing explanations about the social world is approached with some skepticism. Qualitative researchers do not usually make generalizations about the wider social system. "Why" questions usually are the province of quantitative researchers. When qualitative researchers entertain "Why" questions, they search "closer to home for answers":

... to identify distant conditions can risk giving short shrift to the fine points of, and ways in which, everyday realities are lived and represented. It also opens qualitative inquiry to the possibility that everyday life might be portrayed as a mere reproduction of the so-called broader realities. This is not to suggest that ... studies should reject macrolevel explanations, only that the risk of eclipsing the common threads of qualitative inquiry for totalized explanation lurks threateningly in the background. (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 196)

In pursuing a *quantitative* question, a more *deductive* approach is used; asking questions that serve to describe, explain, and even predict events in the social reality. Questions focus on quantifiable factors:

- How many?
- How much?
- How often?

Returning to our body image example: *What is the association between gender and eating disorders among college students?* Deductive questions often presuppose some "testing" of the relationship between two or more "variables." The idea is to create a statement that is testable in the form of *propositions* (statements) about the relationship between two or more variables, one that is independent (assumed to be the cause) and the other dependent (assumed to be the effect or outcome). So in the above example we would state the following:
• What is the relationship between gender (independent variable) and eating disorders (dependent variable) among college students?

DERIVING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

• How do researchers formulate questions?
• What is a good research question?
• How does one get research ideas?

Qualitative research problems derive from many different arenas. As we mentioned earlier, underlying any research problem is a set of philosophical assumptions about a given researcher's notion of reality. But beyond this general standpoint regarding the social reality, questions very often will arise from personal experience and can also come from a particular issue in the research literature on a topic.

Sociologist Diane Vaughan's research on intimate relationships in her book Uncoupling: Turning Points in Intimate Relationships (1990) provides one such example. Vaughan's research questions concerning the ending of intimate relationships involves asking a series of questions she derived from her personal experience as well as from the research literature:

How do relationships end? Why does one partner suddenly become discontented with the other—and why is the onset of that discontent not so sudden after all? What signals do partners send each other to indicate their doubts? Why do those signals so often go unnoticed? How do people who saw themselves as part of a couple come to terms, not just with absence and abandonment, but with a new, single identity? (Vaughan, 1990, back cover of book)

The issue of “uncoupling,” as she terms this phenomenon, grew out of Vaughan's personal experience with separation and divorce and her reflecting back on these life changes:

I was married for twenty years. As I reflected on the relationship after our separation, the marriage seemed to have been coming slowly apart for the last ten. Certainly we had our good times, but I could retrospectively pick out turning points—moments when the relationship changed, times when the distance between us increased. These turning points did not hinge around arguments or the typical emotional catastrophes that beset any relationship. Instead, they appeared to be related to changes in each of our social worlds. For example, I started
college because I realized I was never going to have the steady companionship of my partner and needed something of my own to do. This step, innocently taken, changed me—and us. . . . Although we personally experienced the ending of the relationship as chaotic and disruptive, its demise took on a kind of social rhythm. That an experience could be orderly and disorderly at the same time was counterintuitive. Perhaps this orderliness was because ours was a long marriage and thus its ending extended over a long period, giving the appearance of an orderly dissolution. Perhaps it was a natural reflection of my occupation then: a graduate student in sociology, being trained to look for order. (Vaughan, 1990, p. 3)

Her research questions also arose from a particular article she reviewed in research literature on married life. An article on the marriage process caught her interest and described for her the “reversal” of the process she was experiencing in her own marriage:

During this same period, I came across an article describing marriage as a process in which two individuals renegotiate who they are with respect to each other and the world around them. They restructure their lives around each other. They create common friends, belongings, memories, and a common future. They redefine themselves as a couple in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, who respond to the coupled identity they are creating. . . . These ideas immediately captured my interest, for what appeared to have happened as my own relationship deteriorated was reversal of this process: we slowly and over time began redefining ourselves as separate people. Rather than an abrupt ending, ours appeared to have been a gradual transition. Long before we physically separated, we had been separating socially, developing separate friends, experiences, and futures. . . . In order to answer the questions raised by my own experience and future stimulated by my reading, I began interviewing people about how their relationships ended. (Vaughan, 1990, pp. 2–3)

There may also be certain economic and time constraints placed on a researcher in considering the topic for a research project. James A. Banks’ decision to study how black Americans are portrayed in textbooks partly came about because of economic and time constraints and practical issues of access to research subjects in completing his Ph.D. thesis:
My first idea for a Ph.D. research project was to study the effects of an experimental training program on the attitudes and beliefs of teachers in urban schools. I had to abandon this idea for several reasons. First, it was necessary that I complete my study within a one-year period, and it was unlikely that I would have been able to design and implement the kind of study I had in mind within those limitations. Second, I needed the cooperation of a large urban school district and numerous teachers to conduct the study, and the initial response I received from one large city school district convinced me that it was unwilling to cooperate with me in implementing the study. Third, the study would have been quite expensive to conduct, and I did not have the funds to finance this type of research project. Although I was disappointed because I was unable to implement my “ideal” study, I did not despair. I realized that although the classroom teacher is the most important factor in the child’s learning environment, there are other variables that influence student mastery of content and acquisition of attitudes. Of these other variables, the textbook was perhaps the most important. (Banks, 1976, pp. 383–384)

A researcher may pursue a particular topic and setting because there is funding available to study that topic. There may be granting agencies, public (e.g., government) and private (e.g., foundations), who are dispensing funds to study specific societal issues. Such was the case with Stella Jones’ (1976a) dissertation study on geographic mobility. She was interested in the topic of adult socialization. Focusing on the extensive literature in this area, Jones narrowed down her topic to issues dealing with the “status passages” of adults, that is, how they cope/adjust to new major life changes as they progress through their life cycle (Jones, 1976a, p. 316). She became more interested in “the effects status passage has upon the adult personality, and this interest gradually was more narrowly defined as I considered the adult female and her traditional wife-mother role” (Jones, 1976b, p. 328). The specific research problem and setting she selected for her research were dictated by the type of research population she could obtain access to as well as the funding she could receive to carry out her research interests:

... the sociology department in which my husband has a position ... began planning a symposium on the effects of geographical mobility upon the wife-mother. This symposium was to be funded by a major van line. It occurred to me ... that I might generate some input for this occasion. I assumed that being female would be helpful to my cause. The symposium format called for the presentation of original research ... this
format meant that I would need to develop a research design, get funding from the van line and gain acceptance as part of the symposium. . . . The van line was most receptive to the research proposal. The relative ease of access to funding and a mailing list was a complete surprise to me given the understanding I had of how difficult it can be to gain access into organizations to do research. (Jones, 1976b, pp. 328–329)

Standard research practice advises that the selection of a research problem should determine the type of research method employed within the study. In some cases, however, preference for a given method may serve to dictate the problem to be studied. Anthony N. Doob and Alan E. Gross (1976) were interested in understanding the psychological phenomenon of “frustration.” However they wanted to study this topic using an “unobtrusive” method, whereby research subjects would not know they were being studied. Their method served to guide the specific type of research question they arrived at to study their topic. They note their dilemma:

Most social science research looks as if it were planned in a straightforward, logical fashion. Reports are written as if the people involved had just finished reading the relevant literature and saw a need for a particular question to be answered. It generally looks as if these scientists thought a great deal about the best way to answer the question and then designed their research accordingly. [Our] research . . . does not conform to this pattern. Instead, it resulted from an explicit, self-conscious attempt to design a study utilizing a specific method, which, at the time, was relatively underused in psychology. In fact, in this case, the content that was eventually studied [horn honking] was selected only because it was amenable to the method of interest. (Doob & Gross, 1976, p. 487)

Studying horn honking (an unobtrusive measure) in a natural setting allowed the researchers to set up an experiment in which they were able to measure individuals’ level of frustration (number of horn honks) as follows:

We thought about a number of different ways to frustrate people, eventually thinking about one of the day-to-day frustrations that most urban people experience, that of traffic jams . . . it did not take long until one of us . . . realized that it is easy to frustrate someone in traffic simply by not moving when a traffic light turns green. In a few minutes, then, we had developed our ideas for our dependent variable. We would simply time how long it would take for the driver behind us in line to honk his or her horn. (Doob & Gross, 1976, p. 488)
Perhaps one of the most common paths to obtaining a research problem involves a review of the literature on a given topic. David Karp is a sociologist at Boston College who has written several books about depression. For Karp, a literature review served as the bridge between his interests and an area of inquiry ready for investigation. Let's join David Karp behind the scenes.

**Behind-the-Scenes With David Karp**

Well, it struck me as odd, when I looked at all this literature on depression; a literature that has really important stuff to say about which independent variables were linked to rates of depression, etc. But depression is a feeling disorder. It is an affective disorder. And so, here I was, reading all of this stuff and I wasn't hearing the feelings of the people who have had the disorder. It struck me as a kind of paradox that that was the case. And, as I said a moment ago, one goal for me, at least of qualitative work, is to let people speak, to acknowledge that the people you are interviewing are really the experts. You talk to them because they are the experts. So, I had work to do here, because their voices weren't being heard. There was a journal over there in the O'Neill Library... I was wandering in the stacks one day, and I came upon a journal called *The Journal of Affective Disorders*. It takes up about five feet of our shelf at the library, and there isn't one voice, not one word from a person who actually suffers from depression. I said, "Wow, I've got a thing to do here." That was the start.

While this section is not intended to go over the particulars of how to conduct a literature search, we discuss the variety of ways that a review of research literature can serve to help you formulate your research question. Locke, Spirduso, and Silverman (2000) provide us with a useful metaphor for thinking about the literature review process when they note that it is like an "extended conversation" (p. 63).

The process of locating the voices of individual conversants, for example, is called retrieval. That involves searching through the accumulated archive of literature to find out what has been said (when, by whom, and on the basis of what evidence). The process of listening carefully to the ongoing discourse about a topic of inquiry is called review. That involves studying items previously retrieved until both the history and the current state of the conversation are understood. (p. 64)

First, if you are vague about your topic and want some idea of what is out there in order to begin to narrow down the range of possible things to study,
perusing your topic via a literature review might be a good way to begin. You might first want to familiarize yourself with the specific computerized retrieval systems for literature searches that may be available to you, including the large variety of specific databases currently available online and offline. Many of these databases contain abstracts (summaries) of articles and reports which will enable you to quickly obtain an overview of the works. You may also want to think of some important "key words or phrases" that you can input into these databases that will best describe the topic under consideration.

- How do the authors of these articles define their topic?
- What key terms and phrases do they employ?

Keep a list of these so that you can build up a useful set of terms to input into your databases.

- How have other researchers approached your topic?
- What has been the history of research on this topic?
- What are the research controversies within this literature?
- Where is there agreement and disagreement?
- What specific questions have been asked?
- What has been found out?
- What findings seem most relevant?
- What remains to be done, that is, what burning questions still need to be addressed concerning your topic?
- Where do you find gaps in the literature?

Returning to the metaphor of the literature review as an "extended conversation," you may find that in answering many of these questions you are given an opportunity to listen and ultimately be part of the conversation about a given topic. If you already narrowed down your topic to some specific questions, the literature review can provide you with a context within which to place these questions and will allow you to tweak them on the basis of what you find out in your literature review. Perhaps you will discover that several researchers have already asked a similar question: How will this affect how you pursue your topic? Will you decide to replicate their study, will you extend your study to a different population, or, will you decide to alter your question somewhat to pursue an uncharted area?

In a qualitative research design it is important not to think of the literature review as occurring at a fixed point within the research process, as is often the case in quantitative research, where an exhaustive literature review is often conducted at the beginning of a research project and often serves as a justification for the research question. Instead, the literature review should be an ongoing activity, leaving a record of the findings from your literature review and the impact they have on your research. The impact may lead you to change your research question, alter your design, and add to your findings.

Given this ongoing activity of the literature review, emphasis can be placed on key points in the research design and the data collection and analysis. In qualitative research, take many more notes and review this literature review section more often. So let's take a look at a few (quantitative) questions that a literature review might bring up:

- What are the studies that have been done in this area?
- What are the key findings of these studies?
- What are the gaps in the literature?
- What are the future directions of this research?
a justification for why the researcher asks a particular question and its research significance. Quantitative researchers run the risk of “drowning in the literature” because they may feel they cannot begin a project without leaving a single stone unturned. An inflexibility toward revising their literature review may occur, and it is usually only at the final end of their project that they may again revise their literature review to incorporate unexpected findings.

Given the iterative nature of the qualitative research process, with its emphasis on discovery, the literature review may in fact occur at multiple points in the research process, as new discoveries are made within the data and the researcher looks to the literature to provide a context within which to understand their findings. As a result, the qualitative literature review may take many “twists and turns” as the researcher is led by his or her data analysis to ask new questions that may lead to a different set of research literatures. Sometimes qualitative researchers find it hard to follow a standard (quantitative) research proposal design that asks for a somewhat lengthy literature review when what they propose to do is to discover a given set of questions and/or issues, rather than “test” specific hypotheses they have gleaned from their literature review. Review of the literature then may serve very different functions within qualitative as compared to quantitative analysis.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Research questions, as we have shown, are grounded in a philosophical standpoint regarding the nature of reality, but they are also guided by a range of factors such as academic and personal interests, abilities, social values, as well access by the researcher to particular economic and lifestyle resources. All of these determine the type of research trajectory that a given research project has.

In choosing a research design (a plan for how the researcher will carry out the research project), perhaps one of the most important questions one needs to ask is:


**A POSITIVIST RESEARCH DESIGN: AN EXAMPLE**

The following research question derives from a positivist/postpositivist tradition and asks the following question:
What is the relationship between gender and eating disorders among college students?

This research question/problem states the relationship between two variables; one is termed the independent (that which we believe to be the cause) variable (here, gender) and the other is termed the dependent (that which we believe needs to be explained) variable (here, eating disorders). In the positivist/postpositivist framework the researcher is after a “cause” and an “effect.” In order to determine causality, it is important for the independent variable to precede the dependent variable in time, and that there is a relationship between the two, and that there be no third variable, such that if it is “controlled” for (taken into account), the original relationship between the independent variable and dependent variable will not disappear. In pursuing this research question you need to determine who/what you will research and where the research is going to be pursued. In answering the “who” or “what” aspect, you will need to determine the “unit of analysis” of your study: Will it be individuals, nation-states, organizations, or what? You will then need to list the behaviors and circumstances and settings you are interested in studying (Golden, 1976, p. 6).

To pursue this research question, we would most likely come up with something like the following:

This study is based on responses from 1,000 male and 1,000 female college students. Students were selected from a random sample of five U.S. Ivy League colleges. A self-administered questionnaire was given to each student to fill out, which covered eating habits, dieting, attitudes toward self, family, friends, school, and related issues. Included in the questionnaire were two different measures of eating-disordered behaviors, namely the Eating Attitudes Test (EAT) and the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI). These two measures were scored to classify students into either normal or abnormal categories of eaters.

In the above example our unit of analysis is the individual male and female college student. The setting is Ivy League colleges and the behaviors covered are eating attitudes (dependent variable) and values and other factors involved in determining eating-disordered behaviors (dependent variable). A series of hypotheses can be derived from this initial question:

H1. Women are more likely than men to diet.
H2. Women are more likely than men to binge eat.
H3. Women are more likely than men to express that they want to lose weight.

...
H4. Women will express higher rates of body dissatisfaction than men.

H5. Women will have higher rates of eating-disordered behavior than men.

Once an initial research question and a set of hypotheses are formulated, it is important to consider the following:

- How will you go about “measuring” these ideas? That is how will you “get at” them in the concrete social reality?
- How do you determine if your research subjects have an eating disorder?

*Measurement* is the process whereby we turn *concepts* like “eating disorders” into *variables*. The process of turning concepts into variables is termed *operationalization*. Some variables like “gender” are more easily measured and can often be “given at” through asking a simple question such as: What is your gender? The answer provided by the respondent in your study serves to categorize them (turn them into variables) regarding gender status. Other concepts such as “eating disorders” are much more abstract and may require a great deal of conceptualization concerning what we mean by the term and its various dimensions. Eating disorders have both a *behavioral* and *psychological* set of dimensions that must be measured. This requires asking a number of questions in order to get at the range of behavioral manifestations of the disorder, such as bulimic behaviors, anorexic behaviors, dieting behaviors, as well as a range of psychological dimensions, such as “maturity fears,” “perfectionism,” etc. One might come up with a set of questions in the form of an inventory (scale) called the Eating Disorders Inventory (EDI), which consists of a range of items that captures the behavioral and psychological dimensions of eating-disordered behaviors (Garner, Olmsted, & Polivy, 1983). One would administer these questions to the selected population, and the answers would determine the extent to which one would be categorized as manifesting eating-disordered behavior.

**VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

An important issue that positivists/postpositivists are concerned with in relation to the topic of measurement is the question of the validity and reliability of measures. The positivistic tradition’s view of social reality as “knowable” is wedded to a classic concept of validity, defined strictly in terms of measurement:
- Does the measure measure what it is supposed to?
- Is there a correspondence between the measure and the objective social reality?
- Example: Is the EDI a valid measure of eating disorders?

Kvale (1996) notes that,

In a positivist philosophy, knowledge became a reflection of reality: There is only one correct view of the independent external world, and there is ideally a one-to-one correspondence between elements in the real world and our knowledge of this world. (p. 239)

The term validity is associated with the field of psychology known as "psychometrics."

In psychology, validity became linked to psychometrics, where the concurrent and predictive validity of the psychological tests were declared in correlation coefficients, indicating correspondence between test results and some external criteria. (Kvale, 1996, p. 238)

So, for example, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores would be used to predict success in school (predictive validity). The measure of success would be a student's grade point average (GPA) in college (external criteria). Construct validation measures the validity of more abstract concepts such as "authoritarianism" by hypothesizing what it might be related to (theoretically) if it is a valid measure. So for example, we would expect an authoritarian measure to be related to untrustworthiness and suspicious behavior (see Deutsch & Krauss, 1965).

Researchers within a positivistic paradigm are also concerned with issues of reliability. Reliability asks the question: If I administer the EDI to a group of students on Day 1 will I also get the same response from the same students on Day 2? If there is no reason to suspect any real change has taken place in a student's life from one day to the next, I should expect the EDI to show consistent results in my student respondents from Day 1 to Day 2. If not, then I would be concerned with how reliable the measure was. If there are discrepant results, then there may be something inherent in the way that I am asking particular questions that makes them unreliable and prone to error. This is different from the issue of validity. The EDI measure may be valid, but not reliable. The reason for unreliability may be, for example, in the way I have physically set up the questions in the questionnaire that makes it difficult for individuals to check off the proper box each time. This is not due
to
to the substance of the measure but to the way it has been administered. It may be that to make some measures more reliable, I have to sacrifice detail in the measure, perhaps by asking fewer, less complicated questions to create a more simple set of choices that are less prone to inconsistencies in checking off choices. In this case I would sacrifice some validity for a gain in reliability. That is, I would create a measure of eating disorders that may not be the most comprehensive in capturing all dimensions of eating issues, but is one that is more simple and easier to administer and cuts down on problems of reliability. As a researcher, I am constantly weighing the reliability of a measure against its validity. Ideally one should try to strike a delicate balance between these two concerns.

The second issue a researcher contends with is the decision regarding sampling: What population do you wish to study? Do you want to make generalizations about college students—if your goal as a positivist qualitative researcher is to infer generalizations, then you need to concern yourself with randomly sampling your population. The idea of drawing a random sample from a wider population is that one can draw inferences about the wider population. If a sample is drawn at random, one can use the laws of probability to calculate how closely the sample’s value resembles the true population on a given study variable. There is also a range of probability samples (random, stratified, cluster, and multistage sampling) and non-probability samples (such as purposive or judgment samples or quota samples). In purposive sampling the researcher may not be concerned with the representativeness of the sample with regard to the wider population, and, in fact, there may be no idea of what the wider population is. For example, if I were interested in making generalizations about eating disorders among homosexual college students, it might be more difficult for me to obtain a “master list” of students from which to sample because of issues of homophobia and identity protection.

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

If we decide to follow a different research trajectory and want to study eating disorders among college students from a feminist standpoint qualitative perspective our research goal becomes an understanding from the point of view of those we are studying.
What is the “lived experience” of college men and women’s relationship to food and to their body image?

A feminist perspective is especially interested in uncovering any “subjugated” or “hidden” aspects of individuals’ experience that may have been missed by researchers. Asking survey questions gleaned from the research literature on this topic and administering eating disorder scales like the EDI would not capture the “lived experiences” of these college students. What is their story? We would not then start out with a set of concepts or “measures”; instead we would derive these from the respondents’ themselves. From these concepts we would then hope to understand the process by which eating and body issues become gendered and perhaps even begin to build some theoretical ideas concerning this topic.

Given this research trajectory, issues concerning validity, reliability, and sampling are quite different compared to the positivist qualitative approach we first spoke about.

VALIDITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The question regarding whether college students’ relationship to food and their bodies is valid hinges on a different conception of what we mean by truth. If the perspective of most qualitative research is that social reality is “socially constructed,” then using the concept of “validity” as “correspondence” with the “objective” reality will not work. Then what will?

... validity is ascertained by examining the sources of invalidity. The stronger the falsification attempts a proposition has survived, the more valid the more trustworthy the knowledge. (Kvale, 1996, p. 241)

Validity takes the form of subjecting one’s findings to competing claims and interpretations and providing the reader with strong arguments for your particular knowledge claim (Kvale, 1996, p. 240).

When you are finished reading a qualitative study, ask yourself: What are the factors that make you resonate with the research findings? Does the researcher capture an understanding of the social reality of the respondents he or she has studied? Kvale (1996) has come up with three criteria of validation for any given qualitative study. He defines these as (1) validity as the quality of craftsmanship, (2) validity as communication, and (3) validity as action (p. 241).

When I was a little girl, my mother always told me, “Don’t start your meal with the last bite of the pie.”

This was my mom’s way of reminding me not to eat too much. In the context of this study, the researcher did not have an interviewee found a “lump” in her mouth, did not have the researcher engage in theoretical claims.
VALIDITY AS CRAFTSMANSHIP

"Validity as craftsmanship" has to do with how you perceive the credibility of the researcher and the research. Does the researcher have "moral integrity" (Kvale, 1996, p. 241)? This integrity and credibility is built up through the perceived actions of the researcher. How well has the research been checked? How well has the researcher investigated the findings under consideration? Have the findings been checked, questioned, and theorized? Validation as checking can cover a range of procedures performed on qualitative data (such as looking for negative cases in one's study, going back to respondents when you may not be clear about a point they have made, perhaps sharing your ideas with your respondents to obtain their point of view, making sure that your sampling procedures match your given research question, etc.). As we mentioned, an important aspect of checking your data is that of "negative case analysis." Very often this is done as an ongoing procedure throughout one's study, especially if one is using a more grounded theory approach to research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To validate is to look for "negative" cases within the study. If you think that you have come up with an idea in your data—a key relationship you found, for example—you must go out of your way to look for negative instances in your data where it does not hold up. So, for example, in the study of eating disorders and body image among college students, we derived a concept termed "watching it." This is an abstract concept which describes the range of ways women talk about their bodies being surveyed by themselves and others throughout their everyday activities. For example, Helene, a college student interviewed for a project on college women's eating issues, provides an example of what is meant by this concept from her standpoint:

When I'm home I drop weight, because my mother is always on my back. When I go out to eat she tells me what I should order. When I look fine, my mother says nothing about my body, not even a compliment. But when I start gaining weight, the criticism begins. (Hesse-Biber, 1996, p. 73)

This concept appeared to be strongly related to how women talked about their relationship to food, more specifically what they ate and how much. In order for us to validate this claim, we would want to go through the interviews and look for instances in which this was not the case. If we found a "negative case," we would want to understand why this relationship did not hold for this particular individual. Analyzing negative cases provides researchers with feedback concerning the extent to which their initial theoretical claims are validated by their data. As one researcher notes:
Another important type of checking involves going out of your way to provide alternative theoretical explanations for your given findings and attempting to critically examine the relative strengths and weakness of your argument and alternatives to your argument. (Kvale, 1996, p. 242)

Another important aspect of validity as craftsmanship is the ability of the researcher to theorize from their qualitative data (Kvale, 1996, p. 244). Is the researcher able to tell a convincing story? That is, is he or she able to fit the data to a given theoretical framework and make it credible to the reader? In the case of the study of college students' attitudes toward food and body image, has the researcher derived important theoretical insights from the data? Have you learned more about how women and men relate to their bodies and do you have a fuller understanding of these issues? Have important aspects of a given issue been left out?

COMMUNICATIVE VALIDITY

A second form of validation is communicative validity. One can think of this as a dialogue among those considered legitimate knowers who may often make competing claims to knowledge building. The idea here is that each interpretation of a given finding is open to discussion and refutation by the wider community of researchers, and sometimes this extends to the community in which the research itself was conducted. There is a give and take of dialogue surrounding meaning, a move toward the idea of "intersubjective" understanding of meaning through dialogue. Not all researchers agree on who can share in this dialogue or who has the right to interpret knowledge and how disagreements should be resolved (Kvale, 1996, p. 244). If I were to practice a form of communicative validity, I might ask the students interviewed in the eating attitudes study to comment on my research findings. Do they agree with my interpretation of their interviews? What if they disagree? How will alternative points of view into these findings be resolved?

PRAGMATIC VALIDITY

Communicative validity attempts to reach an understanding concerning knowledge claims within the wider research community and beyond. Pragmatic validity goes a step further and looks to see the extent to which research findings impact those studied as well as changes which occur in the wider context within which the study was conducted. Depending on the type of study, researchers might also concern themselves with ethical, social, and personal issues, and what might happen to the community within which the research was conducted as a result of the research.
of study conducted and the findings, one would expect to look for certain "action" outcomes. For example, in the study of the relationship between gender and eating disorders among college students, we found that the problem of eating disorders was much more prevalent among women than men and that there were certain factors within the college community that contributed to women's problems with food. Several of these factors had to do with the types of food available in the school cafeteria and in vending machines. Other factors had to do with the scheduling of cafeteria hours. One might look to see what impact the research findings had on the wider college community as a result of this report. Did the college food service change its food policies? Was there dialogue in the college newspaper around these issues and did other students push for changes in school cafeteria policies, for example, asking that low-fat foods be readily available in the dining halls? Are research subjects empowered to make changes within their lives as a result of their experience with and knowledge of this project? It is important to keep in mind the power dynamics involved in pragmatic validation. As Kvale notes,

Pragmatic validation raises the issue of power and truth in social research. Where is the power to decide what the desired results of a study will be, or the direction of change; what values are to constitute the basis for action? And, more generally, where is the power to decide what kinds of truth seeking are to be pursued, what research questions are worth funding? (1996, p. 251)

Researchers should consider these issues if they are hoping for some sort of social change to result from their research.

TRIANGULATION AS A VALIDITY TOOL

One important check on the validity of research findings is to employ the technique of methods triangulation; that is, using two different methods to get at the same research question with the goal of looking for "convergence" in research findings (Greene, Caracelli, and Graham, 1989). If two methods come up with the same finding, this serves to enhance the validity of research results. So, for example, we might utilize a mixed-methods approach to study the eating attitudes of college students by combining a qualitative design (interviewing) with a quantitative design (a survey) to see if the results concerning body image attitudes hold up using two separate methods. There are other forms of triangulation beyond using two different methods. We might use two different theoretical perspectives (a feminist approach and a critical
theory approach) to study the same problem (theoretical triangulation) as well as using different data sources (data triangulation) within the same study to enhance the validity of research results. We may also have different investigators studying the same phenomenon (investigator triangulation). So, for example, to obtain data triangulation in our study of student eating attitudes, we might include field notes drawn from observations conducted in the student cafeteria and combine this data with interviews from college students in order to more fully understand the impact of college life on student eating attitudes. We might have two different investigators collect (investigator triangulation) these data sources. A feminist perspective could be applied to understand student attitudes toward food and body image, focusing on potential gender differences. A critical theoretical perspective would look at the power and influence of wider cultural factors, such as the mass media, in order to understand gender differences in student eating and body image attitudes. Utilizing both these theoretical perspectives may shed more light on our understanding of gender differences in eating attitudes with the goal of enhancing the validity of our findings (see Denzin, 1989, pp. 236–247). It is important to note that obtaining validity in qualitative analysis is not a specific entity or end-goal "out there" waiting to be captured by the researcher. Validity is a process whereby the researcher earns the confidence of the reader that she or he have "gotten it right." Trustworthiness takes the place of truth. Lincoln and Guba (1999) note:

The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: how can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of? What arguments can be mounted, what criteria invoked, what questions asked, that would be persuasive on this issue? (p. 398)

There are some guidelines to navigate the important "threats to validity," such as researcher bias and measurement bias. However, there is no specific litmus test we can administer that will apply a stamp of approval to any given qualitative research project.

There are some qualitative researchers who have developed a specific set of "core characteristics" to ascertain the validity of any qualitative study (see Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, & Dillon, 2003) and this raises an important question:

- Should qualitative researchers follow a set of core criteria for assessing the validity of their research?
The search for some specific criteria with which to assess qualitative findings may be harkening back to a positivistic model of the research process that assumes there is a "truth" out there waiting to be found out. Qualitative research stresses the importance of interpretation—that is, how individuals experience their lived reality. In fact, some qualitative researchers might view our discussion of triangulation as a validity tool for convergence of research findings as only one function of triangulation. Triangulation can also serve to capture alternative and multiple perspectives on the social reality! Doubts are also raised concerning whether such "core" validation factors can apply across different qualitative methods. For example, in assessing the validity of a content analysis study the same as ascertaining the validity of findings from an interview project? Studies that seek to develop specific core criteria, in fact, do not always agree with each other on what these factors should be (compare Scale and Silverman, 1997, with Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998).

All measures of validity are not without their issues, nor is it clear that employing all of the above validity checks will result in a one-to-one convergence of research results. What these validity practices can move us toward is the more systematic practice of "rigor" and "trustworthiness" in the research process, so that we can "broaden, thicken, and deepen the interpretive base of any study" (Denzin, 1989, p. 247).

**RELIABILITY IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Neuman (2003) talks about the issue of reliability in terms of gathering data from observations of individuals or events within a field setting. He refers to the "internal consistency" of field observations: Is the data you gathered reasonable? Does it fit together? Does your data add up? Is there consistency in your observations "over time and in different social contexts?" (p. 388). External consistency refers to "verifying or cross-checking observations with other divergent sources of data" (p. 388). The researcher who is concerned with external consistency goes out of his or her way to look for other evidence that will confirm his or her findings. Neuman notes:

Reliability in field research depends on a researcher's insight, awareness, suspicions, and questions. He or she looks at members and events from different angles (legal, economic, political, personal) and mentally asks questions. (p. 388)

As you can see, both validity and reliability are important and complex issues in qualitative research, though conceived of differently than in positivist
work. The following is a reliability checklist for qualitative studies: Gay and
Airasian (2003, p. 536) adapted from Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte's
(1999) ethnographic volume that you might want to employ in thinking about
conducting a qualitative research study, especially one that involves gathering
data from interviews, or conducting an ethnographic participant observation
study.

• GAY AND AIRASIAN’S CHECKLIST IN
EVALUATING RELIABILITY IN QUALITATIVE STUDIES

• “Is the researcher’s relationship with the group and setting fully
described?”
• “Is all field documentation comprehensive, fully cross-referenced and
annotated, and rigorously detailed?”
• “Were the observations and interviews documented using multiple
means (written notes and recordings, for example)”?
• “Is interviewer’s training documented?”
• “Is construction, planning, and testing of all instruments documented?”
• “Are key informants fully described, including information on groups
they represent and their community status?”
• “Are sampling techniques fully documented as being sufficient for the
study?” (Gay & Airisian, 2003, p. 536)

In order to gain a deeper insight into these issues, let’s go behind the
scenes with sociologist David Karp and see how these issues impact his
research practice.

Behind-the-Scenes With David Karp

Well, I guess I would disagree with those who say that people who do qual-
itative research can’t generalize. I make a distinction in my mind between
what I think of as “empirical generalizations” and “analytical generaliza-
tions.” I don’t think you will find this in a textbook, but to me an empirical
generalization is sort of what people do when they do statistical analysis.
They are generalizing from a sample to some larger universe. Analytical
generalizations, in my mind, come sort of close to what Georg Simmel talked
about when he talked about “social forms”—the discovery of underlying
social forms. The kind of generalization that I'm trying to make in my work is the Simmel-type generalization. And I think it is possible to do that kind of analytical generalization with smaller samples of qualitative data. But there are dangers. I wouldn't discount them. The article was based on 35 interviews. My book, Speaking of Sadness, eventually was based on 50. The "Dialectics of Depression" was an article that I wrote along the way. It was absolutely my first effort to say something from the data. You're always trading off breadth for depth. I mean, the great value of survey research is breadth. You truly can, within known probabilities of error, make generalizations about a larger universe of people. It's a very, very powerful thing to be able to do. So, really, the method you use must be dictated by the problem. You don't use a hammer when you need to use a saw. Well, one could say about the 35 people in this study, that they aren't representative, and I can hear that. They're largely white people. I think I had a couple of people in the study who were non-white. And, I think, properly one could say, "Well, might the experience of depression be different for Hispanic people, different for African-Americans, and so on?" I say, "Absolutely!" And there you go. Take my work and move beyond it, and do something else with it. No study is self-contained from beginning to end. Every study, whether it's a statistical study, or an in-depth interview study, with 50, 60, 100, 200 people, is going to have limitations in terms of generalizability.

In the end, the test of validity, of whether you have been well-disciplined by the data, whether you really have discovered some underlying social forms, is whether the real experts, those you've studied, when they read your work say, "You've captured it!" See, to me, the ultimate test of validity is when people have read the work—this is very gratifying—and say, "You know, you really captured my experience. You found a way to convey my experience. It lets me understand my own life more deeply." Truly, I think that the power of sociological work is that when you have an experience as an individual, especially something like depression, you feel so much like nobody else could possibly understand, but when I step back and listen to people, and I listen well, and look for those patterns, those forms, I can see things that the individual can't see in her own life; because they have only their own life to generalize from. So, to me, if the generalization thing is off-base, people will dismiss your work. They will say, "This is off the wall. You're trying to write about depression, but it's so distant from my experience that your analysis just doesn't work."

As you can see, validity, in practice, is also linked to issues of representation and generalizability. This brings us to sampling.
The logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding, usually working with small samples. The goal is to look at a "process" or the "meanings" individuals attribute to their given social situation, not necessarily to make generalizations. We investigate women's attitudes toward their bodies not to make overall generalizations about how many women have problems with their body image, but to understand how women experience being overweight, for example, in a thin culture. Here we would be interested in the process by which women do or do not cope with their body image and the ways in which they interact with cultural messages of thinness from the media and significant others in their lives.

Qualitative researchers are often interested in selecting purposive or judgment samples. The type of purposive sample chosen is based on the particular research question as well as consideration of the resources available to the researcher. Patton (2002, p. 242), in fact, has identified 16 different types of purposive samples, and more than one purposive sampling procedure can be used within any given qualitative study. We will select a few examples of how researchers use some of these particular qualitative samples in their studies.

Katherine Hendrix (1998) wanted to study how the credibility of a professor is communicated in the college classroom and how race influences a student's perception of a professor's credibility. She notes:

The participants in the study represented a "purposeful rather than random" sample. My goal was to obtain the participation of male dyads reflecting professors who worked in the same division and possessed comparable years of teaching experience at the collegiate level. However, three of the professors would be Black and three would be White. (p. 43)

Hendrix (1998) also wanted to interview a sample of students from each of these courses who had volunteered to be interviewed. These students were selected according to their class year, race, and major using a random procedure. However, with a limited number of students volunteering, the random procedure was revised to ensure a diverse pool and students were selected to match specific criteria, such as race (p. 44).

Hendrix used several different sampling procedures in carrying out her research project. The first decision to sample came directly from her research problem: in her review of the literature on the topic of teacher communication, she noted that there were particularly difficult "restricted interactions" between black faculty and their white students. Hendrix speculated that within a four-year university to build a "Professor" (p. 48).

She selected white and black students from courses, sampling from five classes, and in a certain "purposeful" way for these purposes.

Some circumstantial possibility. Given the preceding:

I recall an inside trip to a Plumbers' home. They had plumbed some of the house for a rate and to the extent of opportunities for information.

An implication who can be resident in the site. Very few times were down to work, and who is in the "convenience," a group of similar social class. Not have a poor mouth located in a no choice in the community name "professor."
within a predominately white university she might find "particular challenges to building credibility and acceptance . . . for the Black teacher and profes-
sor" (p. 43). She wanted to follow up on this idea. She therefore chose a large 4-year university that had a predominately white college student population. She selected a "homogeneous sample," a university with a predominately white population, which enabled her to reduce the variation in race of the student population in order to study her problem. However, when it came to sampling six faculties and a diverse group of students to interview from their classes, she employed a stratified purposive sample in order to ensure that certain "characteristics" of the faculty and students were included. Sampling for these differences was crucial in carrying out her stated research goals.

Sometimes, however, sampling follows no logical plan; it just happens. Circumstance provides the researcher with an "opportunistic sampling" possibility. One anthropologist recalls his research in West Pakistan and how a sequence of events led to the unintended selection of individuals to interview:

I recall the use of opportunistic sampling during my first ethnographic trip to West Pakistan. The abundant visitors who voluntarily came to my home served as respondents for innumerable questions; I sought to plumb their motivations and other personality characteristics, and in some cases begged them to take the Rorschach test. Occasionally I solicited my guests with my interview schedule (that had been prepared for a random sample). . . . My wife and children also utilized invitations to the homes of relatively well-to-do or high-ranking families as opportunites to observe certain aspects of domestic life and to obtain other information. . . . (Honigmann, 1982, p. 81)

An important part of conducting fieldwork is having access to informants who can serve as "guides" to provide information concerning the research site. Very often, however, researchers find the selection of informants boils down to who is available, who has some specialized knowledge of the setting, and who is willing to serve in that role. This type of sampling is known as a "convenience sample." There may not be an opportunity to sample among a group of informants according to some given criteria such as age, sex, or social class, for example. Ethnographer Michael Agar's field research among a poor migrant group known as the Lambardi, who resided in a village located in the state of Karnataka, India, notes how the researcher may have no choice in the selection of an informant. He or she is usually earmarked by the community to handle "strangers" and in fact Agar gives informants the name "professional stranger-handlers." He notes:
Among the Lambardi, the professional stranger-handler was an older man named Sakrya. He was the first who came up to talk with me when I entered the tanda [settlement]. He pleasantly explained, for example, that the tanda was overcrowded. Therefore, I had to understand that it would be impossible for me to live there. It was Sakrya who suddenly appeared whenever I began doing something bizarre in the early days of fieldwork, like drawing a map or measuring the dimensions of a tanda hut. After a couple of months, it was partly Sakrya's decision that I was trustworthy that opened up the tanda to me. (Agar, 1996, p. 135)

Another important type of purposive sample is known as "theoretical sampling." This kind of sample is often used as a part of a "grounded theory" approach to research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) define theoretical sampling as "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop... theory as it emerges" (p. 45). Theoretical sampling implies that the researcher decides who or what to sample next, based on prior data gathered from the same research project in order to make comparisons with previous findings. Analyses of findings in your current analysis of the data and the theoretical insights you come up with provide you with new sampling questions like: Who will I talk with next? What additional sources of data should I explore? What data will challenge or confirm my theoretical understanding of this finding? (See Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba 1985; and Patton, 2002.) Anthropologist Michael Agar (1996) provides the following example of theoretical sampling:

Say you've worked with four men on agriculture. You've talked with them about their interpretation of the flow of events that constitutes agricultural work, and you've made several observations working with them in the fields. Now you seek out four more men for shorter interviews and observations who live on the other side of the village. You select them for the purpose of checking similarities in the accounts given by your original sample. (p. 172)

Agar notes that if the researcher finds the results are the same for this group of individuals and learns nothing new by sampling again from this population, then a point of "theoretical saturation" or "data adequacy" (see Morse, 1995) on this group of individuals is reached. The researcher may then opt to interview another group in the village, perhaps those who do not own land, to see if a different angle of vision onto the issue of agriculture is ascertained. By doing this, one enhances understanding through seeking multiple perspectives (Agar, 1996, p. 172). Janice Morse (1995), a noted qualitative researcher, provides the following insights to guide your
sampling procedure that involves a delicate balance between numbers and insight, in other words, "statistical significance" does not mean "theoretical significance."

...in quantitative methods the significance of numbers is carefully taught, and statistical significance is based on frequencies, averages, and the distribution of data. Frequency is central to the analysis, and if a particular instance is too abhorrent, it may even be deleted from the data set as an "outlier" or an error. On the other hand, in qualitative analysis, the converse is true. It is often the infrequent gem that puts other data into perspective, that becomes the central key to understanding the data and for developing the model. It is the implicit that is interesting. (p. 148).

Janice Morse (see boxed text) provides a set of "principles" to follow when thinking about sample size and how to capture issues of "difference" in our qualitative research project.

### Sampling and Qualitative Research

- "Select a cohesive sample. The greater the cohesiveness of the sample, the faster saturation will be obtained, but the less generalizability of the project. This includes using a culturally cohesive sample and a sample that shares (with least variation) the characteristics that address the research topic."

- "Saturation will be achieved most quickly if theoretical sampling is used. Snowball, or a convenience sample, will result in saturation being achieved more slowly. With a random sample, saturation may never be achieved because the sample may be theoretically inappropriate, or poor informants, whose stories replicate rather than provide new information, may be randomly selected."

- "Sample all variations appearing within the data until each 'negative case' perspective is saturated. When constructing a theory, locate every possible "hypothetical" negative case, and give these data equal attention as the mainstream storyline."

- "Saturated data are rich, full, and complete. The resulting theory makes sense and does not have gaps."

- "The more complete the saturation, the easier it is to develop a comprehensive theoretical model." (from Morse, 1995, pp. 147-149)
Qualitative research design relishes a tight link between epistemology (viewpoint on the social reality) and methodology (theoretical perspective into the social world). This is the research nexus we explained in Chapter 1. These factors help shape the research trajectory of a qualitative project—the types of problems selected, what sampling procedures are utilized, and the types of data analysis and interpretation strategies (which we will discuss in greater detail in Part 3 of this book) that a researcher employs. There is a dynamic interaction between these elements of the research process. While we have separated out the parts to look at each individually in this chapter, we can now step back and look at these parts as a whole and how they often influence one another. In order to do so, working within the qualitative tradition, we will compare the dance routines of a qualitative research design with its quantitative counterpart.

Typically the quantitative research process is presented as a “wheel” or a circle. The various parts of the research process make up the circumference, and one can begin one’s research at different parts of the wheel. The process is also presented as a series of steps (Crabtree & Miller, 1999, p. 9).

**Diagram of the Quantitative (Positivistic) Research Process (Adapted from Crabtree & Miller, 1999):**

1. **Step 9: Revise Hypotheses**
2. **Step 8: Conclusions**
3. **Step 7: Data Analysis**
4. **Step 6: Data Collection**
5. **Step 5: Instrumentation and Sampling**
6. **Step 4: Research Design (methods)**
7. **Step 3: Hypothesis Formulation**
8. **Step 2: Literature Review**
9. **Step 1: Define Research Problem**

Crabtree and Miller (p. 8) note that this figure can best be understood “metaphorically” as “Jacob’s Ladder.” In this form of inquiry, most closely associated with the natural sciences, the researcher “climbs a linear ladder to an ultimate position of certainty.” Crabtree and Miller illustrate this process as a linear, cyclical pattern, where the process begins with an initial introduction of the research question and then continues through a series of steps, each building upon the previous one, until the final conclusion is reached. This process is further described in terms of the researcher’s role and the evolution of theory development.
ultimate objective truth" (p. 8). You will notice that the arrows point only in one direction, always moving up the ladder. The quantitative process becomes cyclical when the researcher’s conclusions (step 8) lead to a revising of the initial hypothesis, and the process begins again at step 1 with a redefining of the research problem, and so on. Ideally, within this model all conclusions are open to confirmation (the theory/hypothesis has been subjected to testing and it endures) and for some researchers the hypothesis is also opened up to refutation through seeking alternative explanations and testing these against the original hypothesis (see, for example, Karl Popper’s (1935) concept of “falsificationism”). Most positivist inquiry is now moving to a more postpositivist conception of reality by altering the definition of “truth,” which is now phrased in terms of “probabilities.” As Crabtree and Miller note, “The postpositivist perspective seeks successive approximations to reality but understands the unlikelihood of getting to ultimate reality” (p. 9).

- How would this model be revised if one were to move to a qualitative model of social inquiry?
- What elements would remain, what elements would be added, or discarded?
- How would you relate elements of the process to each other in a holistic manner?

Based on what you have already learned in this chapter, we can immediately begin to see glaring omissions in this diagram. Perhaps the first element that is missing from this process is some acknowledgment of the influence a particular philosophical substructure (paradigm choice) has on the research process. Although qualitative research paradigms may differ in terms of their assumptions regarding the extent to which knowledge can be “objective,” most qualitative paradigms agree on the importance of the subjective meanings individuals bring to the research process and acknowledge the importance of the social construction of reality. In the qualitative research process there is a dynamic interaction between the research problem and the literature review. One’s research questions are tentative and most often not phrased in terms of hypotheses. The goal is one of theory generation. Having said that, this does not mean that qualitative researchers have no interest in “testing” out their ideas. In fact, some qualitative researchers, especially those employing a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) perspective, stick close to their data and are constantly testing out their ideas as their data is being collected. There is an iterative process between data collection and data analysis and theory generation in a process known as analytical induction. As one collects data, one is interpreting it and formulating a range of ideas to test out on
additional data collected and so on. There is a dynamic interaction between steps 6 (data collection), 7 (data analysis), and 3 (hypothesis formulation). Data collection (step 6) and data analysis (step 7) can lead to the creation of ideas/hypotheses concerning the data. This in turn might lead the researcher to collect specific types of data via a particular sampling procedure (step 5), that is, sampling specific cases to test out these ideas (theoretical sampling). The researcher moves back and forth in the steps of research almost as if he or she is doing a dynamic dance routine, whose steps are often unstructured, subject to whatever type of music one happens to be listening to (the data), and the researcher is open to new routines at a moment’s notice (see also Crabtree & Miller, 1999). There is no one right dance, no set routine to follow. One must be open to discovery. There is no linear dance routine to this model; this form of inquiry doesn’t work that way.

Barrie Thorne is a Professor of Sociology and Women’s Studies at the University of California–Berkeley and has written extensively about ethnography. The dynamic dance that often characterizes qualitative inquiry is exemplified by Thorne’s approach to research. Let’s join Thorne for a behind-the-scenes view.

**Behind-the-Scenes With Barrie Thorne**

I start with fairly broad questions, strategically choose a research site (with a case study logic in mind), and proceed to observe, and, in my current work, interview, and also gather relevant statistics (about the area of Oakland I’m studying), e.g., from the census and the school district. Further questions, reworked questions are “emergent,” that is, there is a continual back and forth between the conceptual themes I brought in and have developed and the empirical data; it’s a honing and inductive process, with a lot of discovery and reformulation along the way. (Discovery, opportunities for serendipity—which are also distinctive features of some types of qualitative research.)

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**CONCLUSION**

At this point in the book we hope that you are getting a sense of the complexity of qualitative research on both a theoretical and practical level. In particular, every researcher operates from within a paradigm or, world view. This perspective impacts all phases of a research project and forms the philosophical

substrate of their epistemological outlook of the project and all implications, even if it is a holistic approach. But phases, is it all right to qualify the next box and why, and how, in the manner...
substructure of the research project. The research nexus (the combining of epistemology, theory, and method) is where the philosophical underpinnings of the project intersect with the research techniques you will use. The many issues pertaining to research design that we have reviewed in this chapter are all impacted by these underlying issues. In this way, qualitative research truly is a holistic activity where the varied layers of research, as well as the varied phases, interact with each other. But having said this, one ongoing component to qualitative research has yet to be properly addressed, and that is ethics. In the next chapter we turn to a discussion of the ethical substructure of research and why qualitative scholars are committed to dealing with ethics in a holistic manner.

GLOSSARY

**Analytical Induction:** Iterative process between data collection and data analysis and theory generation.

**Construct Validation:** Measures the validity of more abstract concepts such as "authoritarianism" by hypothesizing what they might be related to (theoretically) if they are valid measures.

**Constructive-Interpretive Approach:** This is one of the three interpretive paradigms in qualitative research. If I take a constructivist or interpretive approach to research I would assume a reality that is subjective and consists of stories or meanings produced or constructed by individuals within their "natural" settings. Constructivists in particular assert that there is no "objective" social reality "out there" waiting to be found out.

**Convenience Sample:** Very often, researchers find the selection of informants boils down to who is available, who has some specialized knowledge of the setting, and who is willing to serve in the role. This type of sampling is known as a convenience sample.

**Critical Approach:** One of the three interpretive paradigms in qualitative research; a critical paradigm deals with how power, control, and ideology dominate our understanding of reality.

**Feminist Perspective:** A feminist perspective is especially interested in uncovering any "subjugated" or "hidden" aspects of an individual's experience that may have been missed by researchers.

**Grounded Theory:** In fact, some qualitative researchers, especially those employing a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) perspective, stick close to their data and are constantly testing out their ideas as their data is being collected.
Interpretive Perspective: This perspective developed as a direct challenge to positivist epistemology and its interpretation/application of objectivity. The interpretive epistemology is based on the interpretation of interactions and the social meaning that people assign to their interactions (Nielsen, 1990, p. 7). This perspective epistemologically believes that social meaning is created during interactions and by people's interpretations of interactions. The implication is that different social actors may in fact understand social reality differently, producing different meanings and analyses. Research of this kind involves the building of relationships between the researcher and research participants who are collaborators in the research process.

Materialist-Realist Ontology: Reality is viewed here as "representational" rather than "real" or "the truth."

Operationalization: The process of turning concepts into variables.

Philosophical Assumptions: These assumptions may often go unstated and unexamined, but they are crucial underpinnings to the research enterprise and help shape its process. The philosophical substructure of a research enterprise guides us and our interpretation of reality in some core metaphysical issues.

Philosophical Substructure: A paradigm choice.

Positivism: The positivistic tradition's view of social reality as "knowable" is wedded to a classic concept of validity, defined strictly in terms of measurement.

Postmodernist Research: This perspective questions the very foundation of what one means by "reality." A postmodernist examines how social life is produced and privileged by those in power.

Predictive Validity: For example, Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores would be used to predict success in school (predictive validity). The measure of success would be a student's grade point average (GPA) in college (external criteria).

Purposive Sample: Also known as judgment samples, qualitative researchers are often interested in selecting these kinds of samples; the type of purposive sample chosen is based on the research question at hand as well as consideration of the resources available to the researcher.

Research Trajectory: Research questions are grounded in a philosophical standpoint regarding the nature of reality, but they are also guided by a range of factors such as academic and personal interests, abilities, social values, as well as access of the researcher to particular economic and lifestyle resources. All of these determine the type of research trajectory for a research project.


**Sampling Procedures:** The systematic selection of a pool of participants.

**Small Samples:** The logic of qualitative research is concerned with in-depth understanding, usually working with small samples. The goal is to look at process or the meanings individuals attribute to their social situation and not necessarily to make generalizations, which is why small samples are often appropriate.

**Subjective Meaning:** Although qualitative research paradigms may differ in terms of their assumptions regarding the extent to which knowledge can be objective, most qualitative paradigms agree on the importance of the subjective meanings individuals bring to the research process and acknowledge the importance of the social construction of reality.

**Theoretical Sampling:** Another important type of purposive sample; this kind of sample is often used as a part of a “grounded theory” approach to research. Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 45) define theoretical sampling as “the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop... theory as it emerges.”

**Theoretical Saturation:** Agar (1996) notes that, if a researcher finds the results are the same for a group of individuals, he or she learns nothing new by sampling again from this population, then a point of theoretical saturation on this group has been reached.

**Theory Generation:** This occurs when a researcher uses her or his data to develop a theory about the social world or some specific aspect of it.

**Validity:** Researchers working within the qualitative paradigm conceptualize validity differently than traditional positivist conceptions of the term. Generally speaking, validity is one of the issues researchers address as they make a case or argument for the knowledge they have produced being valid. In other words, that the knowledge produced reflects some aspect of the social world and/or is compelling.

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What is a worldview and how does it impact the research process holistically?

2. How is research design impacted by philosophical and practical considerations?
3. Why is it important for a researcher to be open to modifying a research project in terms of both theory and methods?

4. How do qualitative researchers think about issues of validity, reliability, and generalizability?

5. What considerations are important when selecting a sample?

6. What does it mean to say that qualitative researchers use a “dance” model of inquiry rather than a “step” model?

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**SUGGESTED WEBSITES**

**Resources for Qualitative Research**

http://www.qualitativeresearch.uga.edu/QualPage/

This website is dedicated solely to qualitative research, with useful links such as publications, discussion forums, methods, papers, and organizations and interest groups.

**Qualitative Research in Information Systems**

http://www.qual.auckland.ac.nz/

This website aims to provide qualitative researchers in IS—and those wanting to know how to do qualitative research—with useful information on the conduct, evaluation, and publication of qualitative research.

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**REFERENCES**


