C H A P T E R   8

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 his information by conducting 3 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.

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). You will also get an inside look at community policing in action (Miller 1999). 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.

The chapter begins with an overview of the major features of qualitative research, as reflected in Venkatesh's (1997) study of Blackstone (the fictitious name given to the residential area). The next section discusses the various approaches to participant observation research, which is the most distinctive qualitative method, and reviews the stages of research using participant observation. We then review, in some detail, the issues involved in intensive interviewing, before briefly explaining focus groups, an increasingly popular qualitative method. The last two sections cover issues that are of concern in any type of qualitative research project: analyzing the data collected and making ethical decisions. By the chapter's end, you should appreciate the hard work required to translate "doing what comes naturally" into systematic research, be able to recognize strong and weak points in qualitative studies, and be ready to do some research yourself.

FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Qualitative methods can often be used to enrich experiments and surveys, and 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. For example, in Venkatesh's (1997) analysis of the social space occupied by a street gang, he observed:

> The result of their [Saint's street gang] corporatization was the emergence of a novel social space in Blackstone, that is, a new orientation to local geography in which the symbolic distinctions of local street gangs challenged the building-centered distinctions that had previously underwritten the power of the Councils. (P. 7)

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.

Miller and Crabtree (1999a) capture the entire process of qualitative research in a simple diagram (see Exhibit 8.1). In this diagram, qualitative research begins with the qualitative researcher reflecting on the setting and her relation to it and interpretations of it. The researcher then describes the goals and means for the research. This description is followed by *sampling* and *collecting* data, *describing* the data, and *organizing* those data. Thus, the *gathering process* and the *analysis process* proceed together, with repeated description and analysis of data as they are collected. As the data are organized, *connections* are identified between different data segments, and efforts are made to *corroborate* the credibility of these connections. This *interpretive process* begins to emerge in a written account that represents what has been done and how the data have been interpreted. Each of these steps in the research process informs the others and is repeated throughout the research process.

EXHIBIT 8.1 Qualitative Research Process
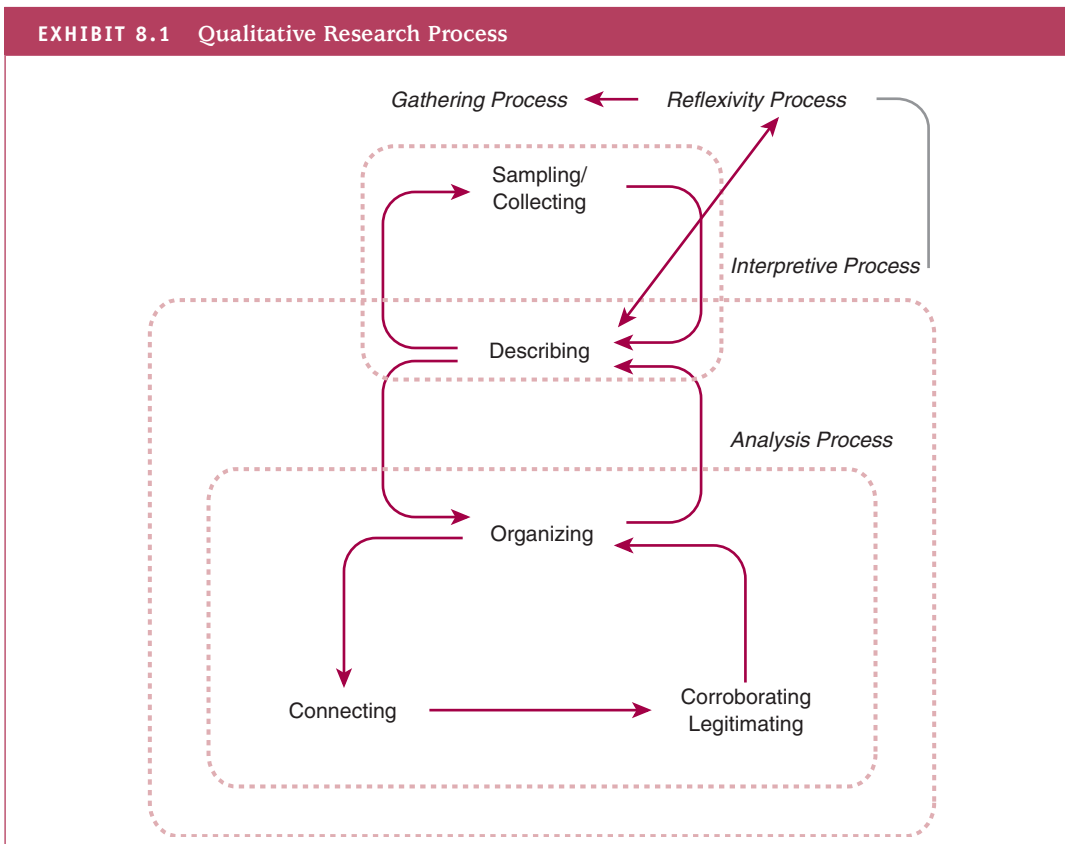
Source: Adapted from Miller & Crabtree 1999a:16.

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 field-work 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 if 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 Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were challenged with was precisely defining a gang. After all, the term gang could refer to many groups of youth, including 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" (p. 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 that Decker and Van Winkle (1996) were interested in:

> Our study revolved around a number of activities, both gang and nongang related, that our subjects were likely to engage in. 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. An accurate picture of gang members must portray both the nature of their gang involvement and the legal status of their 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. (Pp. 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" (p. 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.

The data in Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) study were obtained from the observations in the field and from the intensive interviews. As they state,

> Learning about gangs and gang members can be best accomplished by hearing the gang member's story directly from the individuals involved. . . . We went to great lengths to ensure that each person we interviewed felt they had received the opportunity to "tell their story in their own words." (P. 45)

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.

To summarize, Decker and Van Winkle's (1996) research began with exploratory questions and proceeded inductively throughout, developing general concepts to make sense of specific observations. Although the researchers were not gang members themselves, with observational data collected on the streets and transcripts from intensive interviews, Decker and Van Winkle were able to share many gang members' experiences and perspectives. 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. They successfully used field research to explore human experiences in depth, carefully analyzing

the social contexts in which the experiences occurred. As you will see, like Decker and Van Winkle's work, 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" (p. 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 8.2), 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 also 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 during most projects, often many times. And the researcher's ability to maintain either a covert or an overt role will be challenged many times.
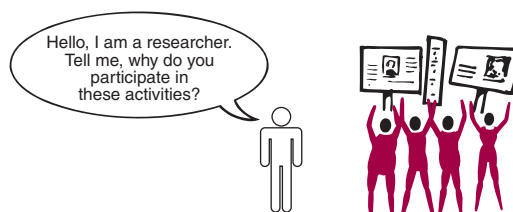
Complete Observation

Miller (1999) adopted the role of a complete observer when she conducted research on community policing. Community policing, as most of you probably know, is an approach

EXHIBIT 8.2   The Observational Continuum

To study a political activist group...

You could take the role of complete observer:

Hello, I am a researcher. Tell me, why do you participate in these activities?

You could take the role of participant and observer:

Hello, I am a researcher and an activist. Tell me, why do you participate in these activities?

You could take the role of covert participant:

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):

I was curious as to whether the interpersonal dynamics I observed with Officer Terry [a female officer] would be like those when a male NPO was involved. I wanted to delve into the heads and hearts of the NPOs, to see for myself what worked in community policing and to see what they felt did not. I wanted to examine how such a paradigm shift in the theory and practice of policing would affect the officers who desire street action, and how they would assess their new "walk and talk" colleagues. (P. x)

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. Eight-hour shifts were evenly divided into four-hour blocks of walking in the neighborhood with the neighborhood officer and four-hour blocks of riding in the squad car with the patrol officer assigned to the same neighborhood. Shadowing both permitted a cross-check of how neighborhood officers perceived the role of patrol officers and of how patrol officers saw their role in conjunction with, or opposition to, the neighborhood policing concept. (Pp. 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, one who will record at some point her or his 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. (P. 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:

> the key to participant observation as a fieldwork strategy is to take seriously the challenge it poses to participate more, and to play the role of the aloof observer less. Do not think of yourself as someone who needs to wear a white lab coat and carry a clipboard to learn about how humans go about their everyday lives. (Wolcott 1995:100)

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 4 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. (Pp. v–vii)

Because of the great deal of time he spent with each gang and social organization he was studying, Whyte (1943) 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. (Pp. 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.

Most field researchers who opt for disclosure get the feeling that, after they have become known and at least somewhat trusted figures in the group, their presence does not have a palpable effect on members' actions. The major influences on individual actions and attitudes are past experiences, personality, group structure, and so on, and these continue to exert their influence even when an outside observer is present. The participant observer can presumably be ethical about identity disclosure and still observe the natural social world. Of course, the argument is less persuasive when the behavior to be observed is illegal or stigmatized, giving participants reason to fear the consequences of disclosure to any outsider. In practice it can be difficult to maintain a fully open research role even in a setting without these special characteristics.

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.

Experienced participant observers try to lessen some of the problems of identity disclosure by evaluating both their effect on others in the setting and the effect of others on the observers. The observers must write about these effects throughout the time they are in the field and as they analyze their data. While in the field they must preserve some regular time when they can concentrate on their research and schedule occasional meetings with other researchers to review the fieldwork. Participant observers modify their role as circumstances seem to require, perhaps not always disclosing their research role at casual social gatherings or group outings but always informing new members of their role.

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. Regular participants enter the observed situation with social backgrounds and goals different from the researchers, whose spontaneous reactions to every event are unlikely to be consistent with those of the regular participants. Suspicion that researchers are not "one of us" may then have reactive effects, obviating the value of complete participation (Erikson 1967). In his study of the Satanists, for example, Alfred (1976) pretended to be a regular group participant until he completed his research, at which time he informed the group leader of his covert role. Rather than act surprised, the leader told Alfred that he had long considered Alfred to be strange, not like the others. We will never be certain how Alfred's observations were affected.
- *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. If others suspect the researcher's identity or if the researcher contributes to, or impedes, group action, these consequences can be adverse. 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.

Entering the field even required Whyte (1943) to learn a new language:

> Since the mother and father of the family spoke no English, I began studying Italian. Conversations with them and practice with the Linguaphone enabled me to learn enough to talk fairly fluently with the older generation. As I became largely concerned with the second-generation men, who conducted their activities in English, Italian was not essential to me; but the fact that I made the effort to learn the language was important, since it gave the impression that I had a sincere and sympathetic interest in Cornerville people. (P. v)

Many field researchers avoid systematic study and extensive reading about a setting for fear that it will bias their first impressions, but entering without a sense of the social norms can lead to disaster. Whyte (1943) came close to such disaster when he despaired about not making social contacts in Cornerville and decided to try an unconventional entry approach (unconventional for a field researcher, that is). He describes what happened when he went to a hotel bar in search of women to talk with:

> I looked around me again and now noticed a threesome: one man and two women. It occurred to me that here was a maldistribution of females which I might be able to rectify. I approached the group and opened with something like this: "Pardon me. Would you mind if I joined you?" There was a moment of silence while the man stared at me. He then offered to throw me downstairs. I assured him that this would not be necessary and demonstrated as much by walking right out of there without any assistance. (P. 289)

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]. (P. 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:

> Both of my friends were well-liked on the force and had great credibility with their colleagues. They vouched for me to others, tracked down retired officers for me to interview, helped with scheduling, answered my questions, and provided

clarification and other assistance as the need arose. . . . Whenever I encountered scheduling snafus or any reluctance by a police offer to schedule an interview or a walk-along, my friends on the force would make a call and easily arrange the time I needed with other officers. (P. 230)

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,

There are a number of groups and individuals with whom field relationships must be maintained. Doing so effectively often involves balancing the competing demands of confidentiality, trust, and danger that emerge in a field study of individuals actively engaged in offending. (P. 45)

Maintaining trust is the cornerstone to successful research engagement, as Decker and Van Winkle (1996) further elaborate:

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. We received numerous requests from gang members to sit in on the interview of a fellow member. These requests were declined a well. The strict confidentiality we were committed to was respected by our subjects, and appeared to enhance our own credibility as "solid" in their eyes. (P. 46)

Whyte (1943) used what was in retrospect a sophisticated two-part strategy to develop and maintain relationships with the Cornerville street-corner men. The first part of Whyte's strategy was to maintain good relations with Doc and, through Doc, stay on good terms with the others. The less obvious part of Whyte's strategy was a consequence of his decision to move into Cornerville, a move he decided was necessary to really understand and be accepted in the community. The room he rented in a local family's home became his base of operations. In some respects, this family became an important dimension of Whyte's immersion in the community. But he also recognized that he needed a place to unwind after

his days of constant alertness in the field, so he made a conscious decision not to include the family as an object of study. Living in this family's home became a means for Whyte to maintain standing as a community insider without becoming totally immersed in the demands of research (pp. 294–297).

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.

Jody Miller (2000) describes her efforts to develop trust with the female gang members she interviewed for her book *One of the Guys*:

First, my research approach proved useful for establishing rapport. The survey began with relatively innocuous questions (demographics, living arrangements, attitudes toward school) and slowly made the transition from these to more sensitive questions about gang involvement, delinquency, and victimization. In addition, completing the survey interview first allowed me to establish a relationship with each young woman, so that when we completed the in-depth interview, there was a preexisting level of familiarity between us. . . . In addition, I worked to develop trust in the young women I interviewed through my efforts to protect their confidentiality. (Pp. 29–30).

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. Because they wanted to interview members from several gangs, they had to restart the snowball sampling procedure many times to gain access to a large number of gangs. One problem, of course, was validating whether individuals claiming to be gang members, so-called "wannabes," actually were legitimate members. Over 500 contacts were made before the final sample of 99 was complete.

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 diagrammed in Exhibit 8.3 (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. (P. 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 studies' generalizability.

You already learned in Chapter 4 about nonprobability sampling methods, which can also be used to develop a more representative range of opinions and events in a field setting. Purposive sampling, which is a type of theoretical sampling, can be used to identify opinion leaders and representatives of different roles. With snowball sampling, field researchers learn from participants about who represents different subgroups in a setting.

EXHIBIT 8.3 Theoretical Sampling

Original cases interviewed in a study of cocaine users:
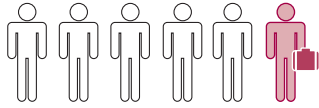
Realization: Some cocaine users are businesspeople.
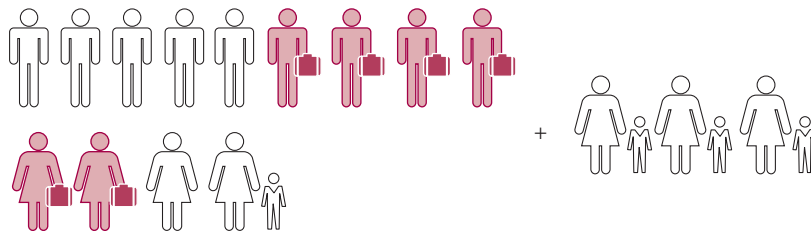Add businesspeople to sample:

Realization: Sample is low on women.
Add women to sample:

Realization: Some female cocaine users are mothers of young children.
Add mothers to sample:

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. For example, 107 adults carried pagers in Kubey's (1990) ESM study of television habits and family quality of life. Participants' reports indicated that heavy TV viewers were less active during non-TV family activities, although heavy TV viewers also spent more time
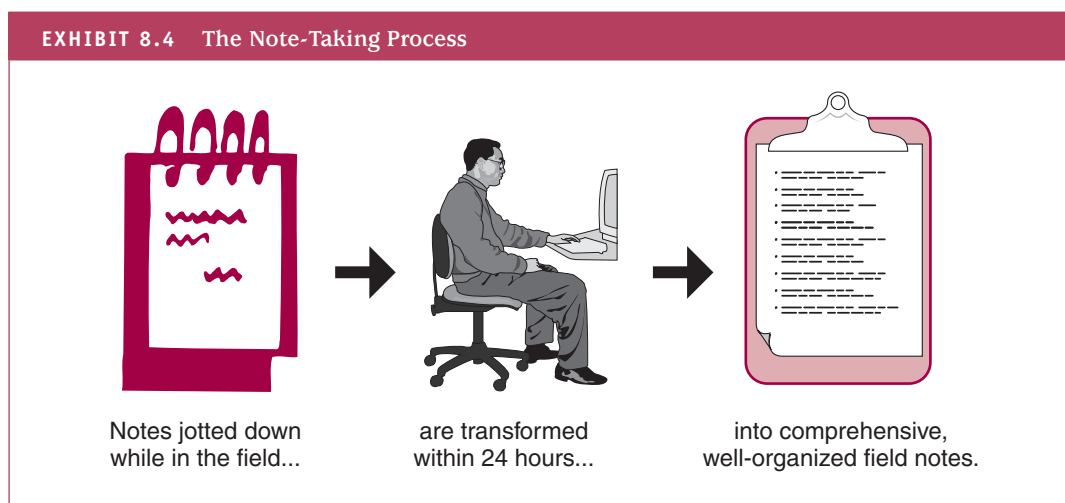
with their families. They felt as positively toward other family members as did those who watched less TV. Although ESM is a powerful tool for field research, it is still limited by the need to recruit people to carry pagers. Ultimately, the generalizability of ESM findings relies on the representativeness, and reliability, of the persons who cooperate in the research.

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 (see Exhibit 8.4) 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.

EXHIBIT 8.4   The Note-Taking Process

| Notes jotted down while in the field... | are transformed within 24 hours... | into comprehensive, well-organized field notes. |

In her study of community policing, Miller (1999) describes how her research team monitored what they observed and heard on ride-alongs and walk-alongs:

Before beginning, the researchers were trained to follow Lofland and Lofland's fieldwork steps (1995:89–98): during the period of observation, take notes to aid

memory and to let respondents know that they are being taken seriously; convert these to full fieldnotes at the end of each shift to minimize the time between observation and writing so that crucial material is not lost; write up observations fully before the next trip to the field; and, when additional information is recalled, add it to the written notes. For the research team, fieldnotes were a "running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people. Each new physical setting and person encountered merit[ed] a description" (Lofland & Lofland 1995:93). Investigators distinguished between the respondents' verbatim accounts and their own paraphrasing and general recall. The researchers also recorded their private emotional responses, based on Lofland and Lofland's admonition (1995:95) that their "emotional experience, even if not shared by others in the setting, may still suggest important analytical leads."

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 be clearly distinguished from the researcher's observations and phrased in the local ver-nacular; pauses and interruptions should be indicated. The surrounding context should receive as much attention as possible, and a map of the setting always should 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. Exhibit 8.5, for example, contains field notes recorded by Miller (1999) for her study of community police officers. The notes include observations of the setting, the questions Miller asked and the answers she received, and her analytic thoughts about one of the police officers. What can be learned from just this one page of field notes? You can vividly visualize the neigh-borhood patrolled on the evening described. Key concepts and phrases are identified in the notes, such as "the hole," which refers to the worst apartment houses in the city ("absent landlords, repairs unattended"), and "jackets," which are tiny bags used to sell crack. The notes depict the nature and tone of the interactions between the patrol officer and several residents, with the officer knowing most of the residents by name and asking about other family members. From such notes, researchers can develop a theoretical framework for understanding the setting and a set of concepts and questions to inform subsequent observations.

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 also 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 founda-tion for later review of the likelihood of bias or inattention to some salient features of the situation.

EXHIBIT 8.5   Field Notes From Susan Miller's (1999) Study of Community Policing

(7–6–95, Officer P, NBH #4)

Once the sergeant arrived, we walked around in groups for high visibility in the 1900 block, "the hole" (worst apartment houses: absent landlords, repairs unattended, no background check for tenants). Planned to search some of the basements for drugs. Several officers commented that "Linc" was seen hanging around the hole more frequently than usual—could indicate increased drug activity. We drove towards the hole. When we got within a block, Officer P. slowed down and asked over radio if everybody was ready. In we went. We parked by the other police mini-station in case anyone wanted sodas later. P. noticed that the windows had been broken, with rocks around. A white woman (early 30s) from the apt across the street came over and said it happened Wed night, and she had already reported it to the other neighborhood officers. Unclear if break happened after incidents on Wed or even if they were related. P. felt they were related since they picked police windows to break. She was very friendly and cooperative, as were her kid (white 12 years old) and her boyfriend (black). We started to walk up to the building on the way 1900 block. Kids came up to us to say hi to P. adults (mostly black) asked P. how he was doing and how things were since the mini-riot last night. Residents seemed to know him, and they answered his questions with ease, some volunteering more information than others. P. knew many by name and often asked about other family members. Easy rapport. At each building, P. would knock on the door of one of the ground floor apartments to ask for a basement key. Women always answered and were friendly and cooperative. Before P. got to the door with a key, one of the private security guards had already forced it open with a knife. The women, upon seeing this, complained to P. that everyone got in that way. (All women are African American unless otherwise noted.) One woman ran after P. asking him to get the landlord to fix the lock on the basement door. P. whipped out his cell phone and dialed right there in front of her (she was happy about that). In the basements, officers poked at the insulation where the walls met ceilings. Last week, they found a gun hidden there, and often find stashes of drugs. Our search found two different baggies full of "jackets," which is a way to sell crack (tiny bags) and a bag of pot. Corners of baggies used to sell crack in $20 quantities on the street. P. documented all of this to show the absent landlord. Back outside (around 8:10), several officers and squad cars surrounding a bunch of on-lookers as well as 3 young males (2 black, 1 white, in 20s) being frisked. They were spotted going from their car into an apartment where they don't live—a known apt where people went to do heroin. One of the bystanders (black, mid 20s) took P. aside to talk about getting some of his personal items back from jail (P. had visited him earlier in jail to get his version of the mini-riot). Search revealed a rock of cocaine.

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). To study the social life of "corner boys," however, Whyte (1943) could not stay so disengaged. Recall that he moved into an apartment with a Cornerville family and lived for about 4 years in the community he was investigating:

> The researcher, like his informants, is a social animal. He has a role to play, and he has his own personality needs that must be met in some degree if he is to function successfully. Where the researcher operates out of a university, just going into the field for a few hours at a time, he can keep his personal social life separate from field activity. His problem of role is not quite so complicated. If, on the other hand, the researcher is living for an extended period in the community he is studying, his personal life is inextricably mixed with his research. (P. 279)

The correspondence between researchers' social attributes—age, sex, race, and so on—and those of their subjects also shapes personal relationships, as Miller (1999) noted:

> In the face-to-face interviews with neighborhood police officers it was my sense that being a woman facilitated the conversation. In fact, other investigators who have considered how the researcher's gender could impede or enhance rapport with respondents have found that women interviewing men may facilitate the subjects' ability to talk openly about their feelings. Men may be more comfortable speaking of intimate topics with women than with other men (Williams & Heikes 1993:281). . . . It made sense to the police that a female researcher would ask them about gender issues and that, as a criminologist, I would ask these questions in the context of community policing. Thus, I was able to examine gendered behavior and assumptions of masculinity and femininity within community policing with greater ease. (P. 232)

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) noted,

> The field worker cannot afford to think only of learning to live with others in the field. He has to continue living with himself. If the participant observer finds himself engaging in behavior that he has learned to think of as immortal, then he is likely to begin to wonder what sort of a person he is after all. Unless the field worker can carry with him a reasonably consistent picture of himself, he is likely to run into difficulties. (P. 317)

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. (P. 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)

When you evaluate participant observers' reports, pay attention to how they defined their role in the setting and dealt with personal problems. Do not place too much confidence in such research unless the report provides this information.

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 of Public Spaces

You first learned about Robert Sampson and Stephen Raudenbush's (1999) study of disorder and crime in urban neighborhoods in Chapter 5. 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 1971b). 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 8.6). 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. To check for reliability, a different set of coders recoded the videos for 10% of the blocks. The repeat codes achieved 98% agreement with the original codes.

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. As you learned in Chapter 5, the combination of data from these sources allowed a test of the relative impact on the crime rate of informal social control efforts by residents and of the appearance of social and physical disorder.

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."

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

EXHIBIT 8.6   Neighborhood Disorder Indicators Used in Systematic Observation Log

Variable	Category	Frequency
Physical Disorder		
Cigarettes, cigars on street or gutter	no yes	6815 16758
Garbage, litter on street or sidewalk	no yes	11680 11925
Empty beer bottles visible in street	no yes	17653 5870
Tagging graffiti	no yes	12859 2252
Graffiti painted over	no yes	13390 1721
Gang graffiti	no yes	14138 973
Abandoned cars	no yes	22782 806
Condoms on sidewalk	no yes	23331 231
Needles or syringes on sidewalk	no yes	23392 173
Political message graffiti	no yes	15097 14
Social Disorder		
Adults loitering or congregating	no yes	14250 861
People drinking alcohol	no yes	15075 36
Peer group, gang indicators present	no yes	15091 20
People intoxicated	no yes	15093 18
Adults fighting or hostilely arguing	no yes	15099 12
Prostitutes on street	no yes	15100 11
People selling drugs	no yes	15099 12

Source: Raudenbush & Sampson 1999:15.

may be used in survey research (discussed in Chapter 7), 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" (p. 45).

Intensive interview studies do not directly reveal the social context in which action is taken and opinions are formed. Similar to participant observation studies, intensive interviewing engages researchers more actively with their subjects than does standard survey research. The researchers must listen to lengthy explanations, ask follow-up questions tailored to the preceding answers, and seek to learn about interrelated belief systems or personal approaches to things rather than measure a limited set of variables. As a result, intensive interviews are often much longer than standardized interviews, sometimes as long as 15 hours, conducted in several different sessions (Kaufman 1986:22).

The intensive interview becomes more like a conversation between partners than between a researcher and a subject. Intensive interviewers actively try to probe understandings and engage interviewees in a dialogue about the intended meaning of their comments. The interview typically follows a preplanned outline of topics, which often are asked of selected group members or other participants in a reasonably consistent manner. Some projects may use relatively structured interviews, particularly when the focus is on developing knowledge about prior events or some narrowly defined topic. But more exploratory projects, particularly those aimed at learning the interviewees' interpretations of the world, may let each interview flow in a unique direction in response to the interviewee's experiences and interests (Kvale 1996:3–5; Rubin & Rubin 1995:6; Wolcott 1995:113–114). In either case, qualitative interviewers must nimbly adapt throughout the interview, paying attention to nonverbal cues, expressions with symbolic value, and the ebb and flow of the interviewee's feelings and interests. "You have to be free to follow your data where they lead" (Rubin & Rubin 1995:64).

Random selection is rarely used to select respondents for intensive interviews, but the selection method still must be carefully considered. If interviewees are selected in a haphazard manner, as by speaking just to those who happen to be available at the time that the researcher is on site, the interviews are likely to be of less value than when a more purposive selection strategy is used. 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 8.7). As new issues are uncovered, additional interviewees may be selected to represent different opinions about these issues.

EXHIBIT 8.7   The Saturation Point in Intensive Interviewing
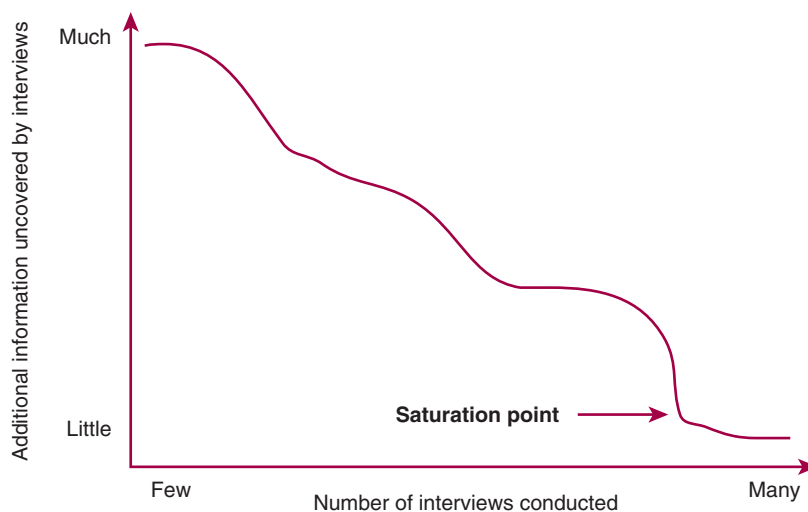
A recent book by Fleury-Steiner (2003) that examines the thoughts and emotions of jurors in death penalty cases is an excellent illustration of the tremendous insights that can be uncovered through intensive interviewing. In *Jurors' Stories of Death*, Fleury-Steiner reports on his work with the Capital 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" (p. 44).

The inductive analytic process of generating theory and making conclusions based on intensive interview narratives is often a time-consuming process. Fleury-Steiner (2003) explains,

> Through numerous rounds of retranscribing and revising, I was able to clarify my interpretations of jurors' stories. . . . Expanding beyond a literal interpretation of what was on the page, I began to notice consistencies in the way jurors made sense in their stories, including the taken for granted normative grammars of both speaker and listener. By privileging the "telling" of jurors' stories, I was able to make subsequent analytical interpretation. Indeed, the more I returned to the data, the more I began to connect the particularities of jurors' stories to broader sociohistorical, cultural, and institutional interpretations of identity, morality, and punishment. (P. 47)

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 coming 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 was 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.

Q: What gives him the juice? (Pp. 97–98)

Do you see how the interviewer actively encouraged the subject to elaborate on answers? More important, intensive interviews can also uncover true meanings that questions utilizing fixed formats would surely miss. For example, during an interview with a female gang member, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) discovered that some gang members were actually confused about what marijuana (weed) actually was:

Q: What drugs are being sold?

A: Coke, crack, marijuana.

Q: Anything else?

A: Weed, that's all.

Q: Weed is marijuana?

A: No.

Q: What is marijuana then?

A: I don't know.

Q: What is weed?

A: Stuff you smoke.

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.

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule. Fenno (1978) presents a compelling argument for avoiding the tape recorder when interviewing public figures who are concerned with their public image:

My belief is that the only chance to get a nonroutine, nonreflexive interview [from many of the members of Congress] is to converse casually, pursuing targets

of opportunity without the presence of a recording instrument other than myself. If [worse] comes to worst, they can always deny what they have said in person; on tape they leave themselves no room for escape. I believe they are not unaware of the difference. (P. 280)

Combining Participant Observation and Intensive Interviewing

Many large research projects aimed at uncovering detailed information about a particular phenomenon often combine the qualitative research techniques of participant observation and intensive interviewing. As we have already seen, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) utilized this double strategy. Miller (1999) also combined participant observation with intensive interviewing in her study of community policing. The information obtained from both methodologies was vital to her conclusions. For example, the observational component of Miller's research show how traditional patrol officers' perceptions and experiences differ from those of neighborhood patrol officers. Her observations also uncovered how rarely the paths of patrol officers crossed with their community policing counterparts. These limited interactions contributed, Miller believed, to patrol officers' misconceptions about community policing. Patrol officers believed that neighborhood police officers (NPOs) did not do real police work and spent too much time responding to residents and political needs, not to crime-fighting goals.

Through both methods, Miller (1999) also uncovered differences in what was observed in group settings compared to what was revealed in one-on-one interviews with the officers. On ride-alongs with patrol officers, Miller observed that it was customary to gather during the shift at a predetermined place for dinner or in an uncrowded parking lot. She observed that although these meetings involved both women and men, the discussions usually revolved around "guy stuff," such as joking about guns, and pretending to pull out a gun. Miller describes,

> Their language was full of expletives, with some version of "f—k" being the most common. . . . Common topics of conversation were upcoming shooting competitions, physical training, qualifications, and similar physical activities. The men tended to tell us, the researchers, what kind of exercise regimens they followed, and which officers helped with running, training, and weight lifting at the police academy. These topics reinforced the tough, masculine, crime-fighting image of policing. Patrolwomen who were part of these "jawing" sessions engaged in the conversation with equal heartiness. (Pp. 175–176)

If Miller (1999) had only performed this observation, she would not have discovered the more gendered nature of the patrol officers' perceptions and experiences that was uncovered in her intensive interviews:

> Even though the patrolwomen joined in the banter and told their share of crime-fighting war stories, it became clear during one-on-one conversations with them they dropped their aggressive facade when their actions were less visible to other patrol officers. The women were more than superficially involved in some of the local people's lives, particularly with the children. (P. 176)

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are groups of unrelated individuals that 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.

Focus groups have their roots in the interviewing techniques developed in the 1930s by sociologists and psychologists who were dissatisfied with traditional surveys. Traditionally, in a questionnaire survey, subjects are directed to consider certain issues and particular response options in a predetermined order. The spontaneous exchange and development of ideas that characterize social life outside the survey situation are lost, and with them, some social scientists feared, the prospects for validity.

Focus groups were used by the military in World War II to investigate morale and then were popularized by the great American sociologist Robert K. Merton and two collaborators, Marjorie Fiske and Patricia Kendall, in *The Focused Interview* (1956). But marketing researchers were the first to adopt focus groups as a widespread methodology. Marketing researchers use focus groups to investigate likely popular reactions to possible advertising themes and techniques. Their success has prompted other social scientists to use focus groups to evaluate social programs and to assess social needs (Krueger 1988:18–22).

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.

Kandakai et al.'s (1999) study of mothers' perceptions of violence in schools provides a good example of the effective use of focus groups in research. Recall from Chapter 1 that this research involved survey methodology and examined the reasons mothers most often gave for school violence. Before Kandakai et al. designed their questionnaire, however, they conducted focus groups with mothers to identify in a more detailed manner their perceptions of the causes of school violence. Specifically, four focus groups of six to eight mothers of

junior high school students from both urban and suburban areas were conducted to ascertain mothers' most salient beliefs regarding school violence. Responses that were given at least three times during a focus group were then added to the final questionnaire. For example, if during the course of a focus group, at least three mothers mentioned that the lack of supervision in schools was an important factor related to school violence, then this reason was included as a response choice in the questionnaire.

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.

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 well-being, identity disclosure, and confidentiality:

Voluntary Participation

To test your understanding of qualitative research ethics, go to the Qualitative Research Interactive Exercises on the Student Study Site.

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 Well-Being

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 nor 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). Some police accused Van Maanen (1982) of damaging their reputations with his studies. But such consequences could follow from any research, even from any public discourse. 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. Whyte (1943:335–337) found himself regretting having recommended that a particular politician be allowed to speak to a social club he was observing because the speech led to serious dissension in the club and strains between Whyte and some club members. These problems are rare in intensive interviewing and focus groups, but even there, researchers should try to identify negative feelings and help distressed subjects cope with their feelings through debriefing or referrals for professional help.

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 snow-ball 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 well-being" 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. (P. 26)

Identity Disclosure

We already have considered 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 to 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 some participants clearly 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.

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

Complete observation	Participant observation
Covert (complete) participation	Qualitative methods
Experience sampling method (ESM)	Reactive effect
Field notes	Saturation point
Field research	Tacit knowledge
Focus group	Theoretical sampling
Intensive interviewing	

HIGHLIGHTS

- Qualitative methods are most useful in exploring new issues, investigating hard-to-study groups, and determining the meaning people give to their lives and actions. In addition, most social research projects can be improved in some respects by taking advantage of qualitative techniques.

- 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. Such a role avoids the ethical issues posed by covert participation while still allowing the customary insights into the social world derived from directly participating in it. The role that the participant observer chooses should be based on an evaluation of the problems likely to arise from reactive effects, the ethical dilemmas of covert observation, and the consequences of identity disclosure in the particular setting.

- Field researchers must develop strategies for entering the field, developing and maintaining relations in the field, sampling, and recording and analyzing data. Sampling techniques commonly used in field research include theoretical sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling, quota sampling, and in special circumstances, random selection with the experience sampling method.

- 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 specific question content and order varying from one interview can supplement participant observation data.

- 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.

- The four main ethical issues in field research concern voluntary participation, subject well-being, identity disclosure, and confidentiality.

EXERCISES

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. Explore a qualitative project using the software HyperRESEARCH (see Student Study Site) and your own data. Conduct a brief observational study in a public location on campus where students congregate. A cafeteria, a building lobby, or a lounge would be ideal. You can sit and observe, taking occasional notes unobtrusively, without violating any expectations of privacy. Observe for 30 minutes. Write up field notes, being sure to include a description of the setting and a commentary on your own behavior and your reactions to what you observed. Then load the demonstration copy of HyperRESEARCH, and make your own project.

3. 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.

4. Read about focus groups in one of the references cited in this chapter and then devise a plan for using a focus group to explore and explain student perspectives about crime on campus. How would you recruit students for the group? What types of students would you try to include? How would you introduce the topic and the method to the group? What questions would you ask? What problems would you anticipate (e.g., discord between focus group members or digressions from the chosen topic)? How would you respond to these problems?

5. 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?

6. 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.

7. Find the Qualitative Research lesson in the interactive exercises on the Student Study Site http://www.sagepub.com/prccj3. 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.

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. Pick 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: (1) choose a site and justify its selection in terms of its likely value for the research, (2) choose a role along the participation-observation continuum and justify your choice, (3) describe access procedures and note any likely problems, (4) discuss how you will develop and maintain relations in the site, (5) review any sampling issues, and (6) 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: (1) present and justify a method for selecting individuals to interview, (2) write out three introductory biographical questions and five "grand tour" questions for your interview schedule, (3) list at least six different probes you may use, (4) present and justify at least two follow-up questions for one of your grand tour questions, and (5) explain what you expect this intensive interview component to add to your overall survey project.

> **Student Study Site**
>
> The companion Web site for *The Practice of Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Third Edition
>
>   **http://www.sagepub.com/prccj3**
>
>   Visit the Web-based Student Study Site to enhance your understanding of the chapter content and to discover additional resources that will take your learning one step further. You can enhance your understanding of the chapters by using the comprehensive study material, which includes e-flashcards, Web exercises, practice self-tests, and more. You will also find special features, such as Learning from Journal Articles, which incorporates SAGE's online journal collection.

WEB EXERCISES

1. Go to the *Annual Review of Sociology*'s Web site 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 topic. List the Web sites you found, and write a paragraph about the purpose of each focus group and the sample involved. How might these focus groups be used to influence public policy?

ETHICS EXERCISES

1. 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?

2. 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? Do you believe some people will say anything to earn money? 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 that did not happen to be on your interview list? How should gratuities be handled? Write a paragraph on how gratuities should be handled.

SPSS EXERCISES

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.

C H A P T E R   9

Qualitative Data Analysis

*I don't think most girls would go out there and kill somebody. It just depends on how crazy
you are and how much you hate that person. But I don't really think, I don't think they
would do it as much as the boys would do. I wouldn't. I wouldn't go out there and kill
somebody just 'cause they wearin' that color. I wouldn't do that. I might beat 'em up or
get me, I might get beat up. But I would never go out to that certain extent to kill 'em.*

—Miller 2000

The statement above was made by a young female gang member. This statement, along
with several other narratives about the reality of violence in gang life for female gang
members, led Miller (2000) to conclude that female gang members were less likely to resort
to serious violence compared to their male counterparts. Narratives such as these often

represent the type of data that are analyzed in qualitative data analysis. The first difference, then, between qualitative and quantitative data analysis is that the data to be analyzed are text, rather than numbers, at least when the analysis first begins.

In this chapter, we will present the features that most qualitative data analyses share, and illustrate these features with research on several topics including youth victimization and community oriented policing. You will quickly learn that there is no one way to analyze textual data. To quote Michael Quinn Patton (2002),

> Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at. (P. 432)

We will discuss some of the different types of qualitative data analysis before focusing on computer programs for qualitative data analysis; you will see that these increasingly popular programs are blurring the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative approaches to textual analysis.

FEATURES OF QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

The distinctive features of qualitative data collection methods that you studied in Chapter 8 are also reflected in the methods used to analyze those data. 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.

What can the qualitative data analyst learn from a "text"? Here qualitative analysts may have two different goals. Some view analysis of a text as a way to understand what participants "really" thought, felt, or did in some situation or at some point in time. The text becomes a way to get "behind the numbers" that are recorded in a quantitative analysis to see the richness of real social experience. Other qualitative researchers have adopted a **hermeneutic perspective** on texts, that is, a perspective that views a text as an interpretation that can never be judged true or false. The text is only one possible interpretation among many (Patton 2002:114).

From a hermeneutic perspective, the meaning of a text is negotiated among a community of interpreters, and to the extent that some agreement is reached about meaning at a particular time and place, that meaning can only be based on consensual community validation. A researcher is constructing a "reality" with her interpretations of a text provided by the subjects of research; other researchers, with different backgrounds, could come to markedly different conclusions.

You can see in this discussion about text that qualitative and quantitative data analyses also differ in the priority given to the prior views of the researcher and to those of the subjects of the research. Qualitative data analysts seek to describe their textual data in ways

that capture the setting or people who produced this text on their own terms rather than in terms of predefined measures and hypotheses. This means that qualitative data analysis tends to be inductive; the analyst identifies important categories in the data, as well as patterns and relationships, through a process of discovery. There are often no predefined measures or hypotheses. Anthropologists term this an **emic focus**, which means representing the setting in terms of the participants, rather than an **etic focus**, in which the setting and its participants are represented in terms that the researcher brings to the study.

Good qualitative data analyses also 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 his 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).

> We emphasize placing an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case, one who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings. Initial research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study by the case researcher. The aim is to thoroughly understand [the case]. If early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed. (Stake 1995:9)

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 American, the status of blacks, and "gangland" challenged some of my preconceived notions about these topics. (P. xiv)

Carrying out this process successfully is more likely if the analyst reviews a few basic guidelines when he or she starts the process of analyzing qualitative data (Miller & Crabtree 1999b:142–143):

- Know yourself, your biases, and preconceptions.
- Know your question.
- Seek creative abundance. Consult others and keep looking for alternative interpretations.
- Be flexible.
- Exhaust the data. Try to account for all the data in the texts, then publicly acknowledge the unexplained and remember the next principle.
- Celebrate anomalies. They are the windows to insight.
- Get critical feedback. The solo analyst is a great danger to self and others.
- Be explicit. Share the details with yourself, your team members, and your audiences.

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. When it comes right down to it, 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):

Interpretation is a complex and dynamic craft, with as much creative artistry as technical exactitude, and it requires an abundance of patient plodding, fortitude, and discipline. There are many changing rhythms; multiple steps; moments of jubilation, revelation, and exasperation. . . . The dance of interpretation is a dance for two, but those two are often multiple and frequently changing, and there is always an audience, even if it is not always visible. Two dancers are the interpreters and the texts. (Pp. 138–139)

The "dance" of qualitative data analysis is represented in Exhibit 9.1, which captures the alternation between immersion in the text to identify meanings and editing the text to create categories and codes. The process involves three different modes of reading the text:

1. When the researcher reads the text literally (L, in Exhibit 9.1), she is focused on its literal content and form, so the text "leads" the dance.

2. When the researcher reads the text reflexively (R), she focuses on how her own orientation shapes her interpretations and focus. Now, the researcher leads the dance.

3. When the researcher reads the text interpretively (I), she tries to construct her own interpretation of what the text means.

EXHIBIT 9.1   Dance of Qualitative Analysis
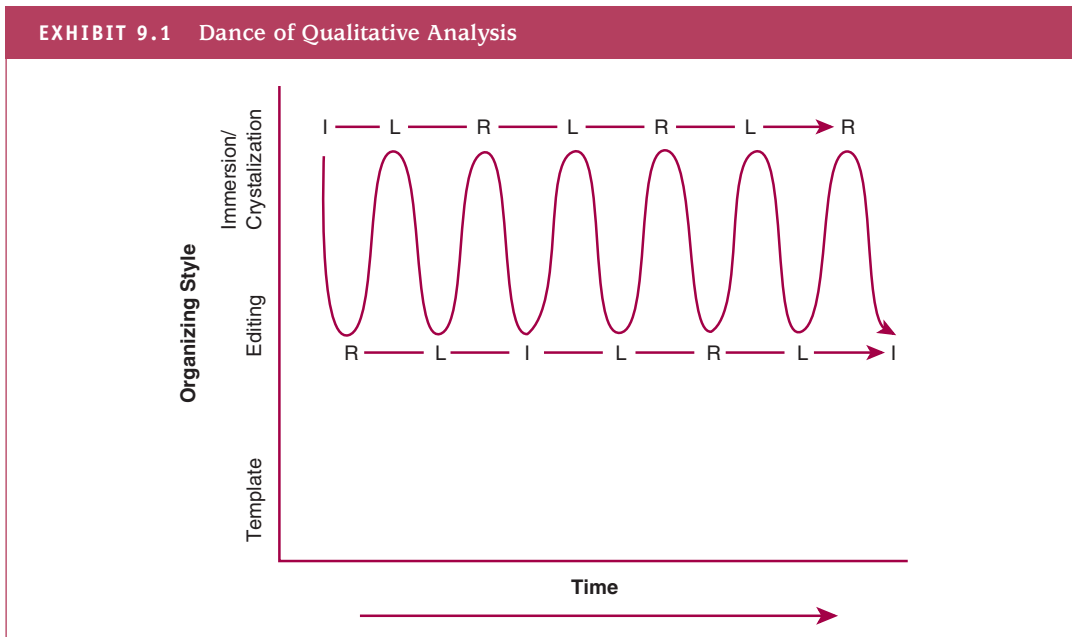
Source: Miller & Crabtree 1999b:139, Figure 7.1. Based on Addison 1999.

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 her concepts and interpretations are reflected in it.

Qualitative Compared to 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

Exhibit 9.2 outlines the different techniques that are shared by most approaches to qualitative data analysis:

1. Documentation of the data and the process of data collection
2. Organization or categorization of the data into concepts
3. Connection of the data to show how one concept may influence another
4. Corroboration or legitimization, by evaluating alternative explanations, disconfirming evidence, and searching for negative cases
5. 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: "husband/wife conflict," perhaps, or "tension reduction strategy."

EXHIBIT 9.2   Flow Model of Qualitative Data Analysis Components
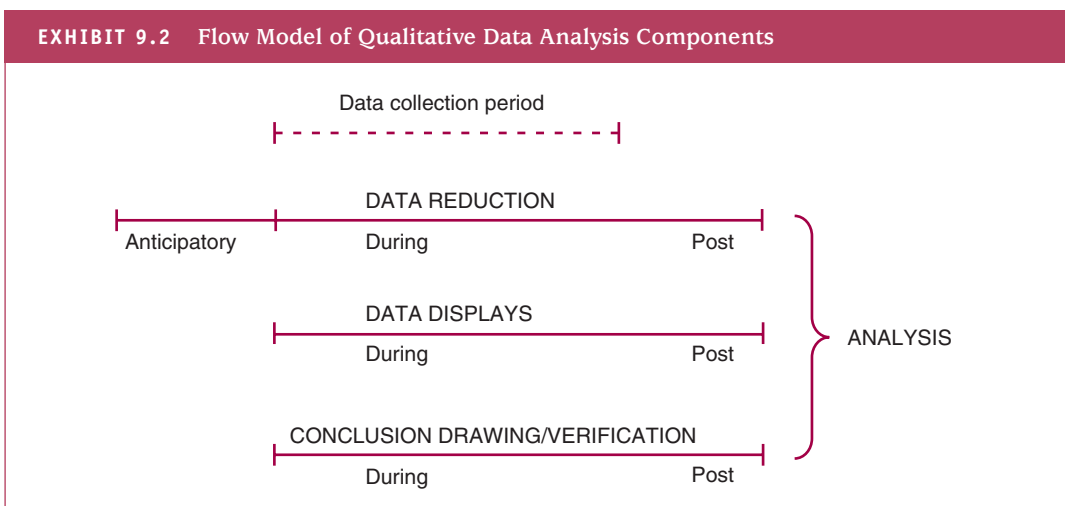
Source: Miles & Huberman 1994:10, Figure 1.3. Used with permission.

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. (P. 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

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.

> Usually, I wrote these notes immediately after spending time in the setting or the next day. Through the exercise of writing up my field notes, with attention to "who" the speakers and actors were, I became aware of the nature of certain social relationships and their positional arrangements within the peer group. (Anderson 2003:38)

You can see the analysis already emerging from this simple process of taking notes.

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.

An excellent example of a documentation guide is provided by Tammy Anderson (forthcoming), who conducted a large study of drug use and victimization in nightclub events (e.g., raves, hip-hop, and EDM events) in Philadelphia. When she and her team entered an event for direct observation, they followed a guideline form, which cued the researcher to obtain information about all pertinent data points (see Exhibit 9.3).

EXHIBIT 9.3   Example of a Direct Observation Form for Nightclub Observation.

1. Site:

2. Period of observation:

3. Type of event:

4. Description of clubber demographics:

5. Description of conversations with clubbers and staff:

Description of response to ethnographer's presence, conversations:

Social organization of event	Physical layout (chill areas, dance floor, dj box, exits, bars)	Utilization of area by clubbers	Clubbers' interactions within areas	Entertainment personnel
Social organization of event II	Staffing patterns	Roles and Behaviors	Interaction with clubbers by security, managers, bartenders	Entertainment personnel
Club's cultural ethos	Vibe	Music	Norms	Identity markers or props
Outside support agencies	Public safety	Law enforcement	Medical personnel	
Behaviors at event	Type	Frequency	Impact	
Clubbers' typologies	Dress and props	Status indicators	Clubbing motives	
Drug or alcohol consumption	Clubbers	Staff	Consequences	
Victimization	Observed	Rumored	Victim or offender	Consequences (e.g., clubber and staff reaction)
Personal reflections				

Source: Anderson, forthcoming.

Conceptualization, Coding, and Categorizing

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

To test your
understanding
of qualitative
data analysis
techniques,
go to the
Qualitative
Data Analysis
Interactive
Exercises on
the Student
Study Site.

> When Adam ran a pushbroom into the feet of the children nearby, I jumped to
> conclusions about his interactions with other children: aggressive, teasing, arresting.
> Of course, just a few minutes earlier I had seen him block the children climbing the
> steps in a similar moment of smiling bombast. So I was aggregating, and testing my
> unrealized hypotheses about what kind of kid he was, not postponing my
> interpreting. . . . My disposition was to keep my eyes on him. (P. 74)

The focus in this conceptualization "on the fly" is to provide a detailed description of
what was observed and a sense of why that was important.

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. Elijah Anderson (2003) recounts how his concep-
tualization of social stratification at Jelly's Bar developed over a long period of time:

> I could see the social pyramid, how certain guys would group themselves and say
> in effect, "I'm here and you're there." I made sense of these crowds [initially] as
> the "respectables," the "non-respectables," and the "near-respectables." . . . Inside,
> such non-respectables might sit on the crates, but if a respectable came along and
> wanted to sit there, the lower status person would have to move. (Pp. 18–19)

But this initial conceptualization changed with experience, as Anderson (2003) realized
that the participants themselves used other terms to differentiate social status: "winehead,"
"hoodlum," and "regular" (p. 28). What did they mean by these terms? "The 'regulars' basi-
cally valued 'decency.' They associated decency with conventionality but also with 'work-
ing for a living,' or having a 'visible means of support'" (p. 29). In this way, Anderson
progressively refined his concept as he gained experience in the setting.

Miller (2000) provides another excellent illustration of this iterative process of concep-
tualization 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. Consequently, I developed an entire theoretical
> discussion around the contradictory operation of gender within the subject. 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. (P. 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 his understanding of this concept by investigating its meaning. By observing the concept's frequency of use, he came to realize its importance. Then he 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 9.4 displays a matrix used in evaluation research to capture the relationship between the extent to which stakeholders in a new program had something important at stake in the program and the researcher's estimate of their favorability toward the program. Each cell of the matrix was to be filled in with a summary of an illustrative case study. In other matrix analyses, quotes might be included in the cells to represent the opinions of these different stakeholders, or the number of cases of each type might appear in the cells. The possibilities are almost endless. Keeping this approach in mind will generate many fruitful ideas for structuring a qualitative data analysis.

The simple relationships that are identified with a matrix like that shown in Exhibit 9.4 can be examined and then extended to create a more complex causal model. Such a model represents the multiple relationships among the constructs identified in a qualitative analysis as important for explaining some outcome. A great deal of analysis must precede the construction of such a model, with careful attention to identification of important variables and the evidence that suggests connections between them.

EXHIBIT 9.4   Coding Form for Relationships: Stakeholders' Stakes

Estimate of Various Stakeholders' Inclination Toward the Program			
How high are the stakes for various primary stakeholders?	*Favorable*	*Neutral or Unknown*	*Antagonistic*
High			
Moderate			
Low			

Source: Patton 2002:472.

Note: Construct illustrative case studies for each cell based on fieldwork.