Qualitative Research:
What It Is, What It Isn’t, And How It’s Done

Margaret D. LeCompte and Judith Preissle

[begin page 141 in original]

1 Qualitative research as an approach to inquiry is customarily distinguished from other human science research both conceptually and methodologically. Conceptual distinctions relate to the philosophical, theoretical, and disciplinary traditions from which qualitative researchers draw. Because these traditions are several and diverse, they contribute to the multiplicity of conceptual stances held by those calling themselves qualitative researchers (Atkinson, Delamont, & Hammersley, 1988; Jacobs, 1987, 1988). Connected in many ways to conceptual distinctions are methodological distinctions between qualitative research and other approaches to inquiry; these refer to design and execution of a study.

What Is Qualitative Research?

2 From a methodological perspective, qualitative research is a loosely defined collection of approaches to inquiry (Qoetz & LeCompte, 1984), all of which rely on verbal, visual, tactile, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory data. These data are preserved in descriptive narratives like field notes; recordings or other transcriptions from audio- and videotapes; other written records; and pictures or films. Artifacts — consisting of products people use, objects people make, and records of what they do, say, produce, or write — also are collected as qualitative data.

3 Qualitative research is based on and grounded in descriptions of observations. These descriptions address the fundamental question, what is happening here? Most qualitative research designs are intended to address this question. It can be asked about anything — ordinary occurrences, extraordinary events, or circumstances puzzling to some investigator. What is crucial is the attention to the unfolding of events in the natural flow of human activity.

4 Some scholars prefer to define qualitative research conceptually, rather than methodologically. They focus less on the design and execution of an investigation and more on philosophical issues. Erickson, for example, prefers the term interpretive to qualitative. He stresses the importance in qualitative research of “using as a basic validity criterion the immediate and local meanings of actions, as defined from the actors’ point of view” (1986, p. 119, emphasis in original). For Erickson, qualitative research focuses on interpreting human meaning in social life and must be informed by phenomenological approaches.

5 A second — and not entirely accurate — synonym in common usage for the term qualitative is phenomenological. Investigations into human life from a phenomenological perspective focus on the world as it is reported through human experience. These investigations are constituted from a philosophy that the world can only be observed and understood through the mediating influence of the human mind. Yet another label applied to qualitative research is hermeneutic, which focuses more on the role of the
researcher as a translator of human meaning; the “hermeneut” elicits meanings from people in one cultural setting and renders them comprehensible to people in another and different cultural setting.

Regardless of the labels they use, investigators who choose to use qualitative research designs have faced criticism because their work does not appear to conform to the same canons of rigor applied to experimental or quasiexperimental designs. Some scholars still prefer to regard quantitative and qualitative approaches as philosophically incompatible (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, most of the debate over the relative legitimacy of qualitative versus quantitative research or positivistic versus phenomenological inquiry has resolved into a recognition that researcher proclivities and interests, research questions, and purposes, rather than rectitude and rigor, dictate the methods to be used for investigation (Guba, 1990).

The term qualitative research has become an umbrella label for a group of specific research designs, including case studies, field studies, community studies, life histories, document analyses, ethnographies, and clinical studies. These designs are distinguished by such factors as the size of the population and the boundedness of the research site, the degree to which the research problems and categories of meaning are dictated by the study participants rather than the investigator, and the degree to which events to be observed are unstructured by the researcher. Case study, for example, refers to investigations of single phenomena (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1978). Clinical examinations of psychotic individuals are case studies, as are investigations of individual organizations, even though they might use different research methods.

Generally, qualitative studies use smaller groups of people and are informed by participant constructs more often than are quantitative studies. Similarly, qualitative studies tend to occur in naturalistic or unmanipulated settings in contrast to quantitative studies.

Unfortunately, social science methodologists have failed to make definitive distinctions among research designs. The names commonly given to research designs do not clearly discriminate between design and methods of data collection and analysis. They often refer to different and noncomparable aspects of the mode of investigation. Designs are defined by any of the following aspects:

1. the kind of research site (field study versus laboratory study);
2. the number of units studied (case study versus survey);
3. the role the researcher assumes in relation to study participants (participant observation);
4. the importance given to participant definitions and constructs (phenomenological studies);
5. the number of items studied and their amenability to statistical analysis (quantitative studies);
6. forms of data collection (questionnaire research, participant observation);
7. the degree of control exercised by the researcher over those studied (experiments, naturalistic research); and
8. the place theory is given in the study and the role it plays in analysis and interpretation of data (grounded theory research; inductive or deductive research) (LeCompte, 1990).

Given the variability in what a research design label emphasizes, it is not surprising that scholars disagree on whether a certain example of research represents a particular design, much less on which standards to use to assess kinds of design. This reflects, we believe, the rapid advances made in human science research in the past 30 years. Methodologists have spent more time and energy characterizing innovative approaches of research practitioners than they have devoted to dictating canons to the inexperienced, a trend we applaud.

As we have suggested elsewhere (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), we prefer to avoid dichotomizing human inquiry into competing paradigms of qualitative and quantitative research. Rather, we prefer to view human research as varying along dimensions that are integrative, pragmatic, multidimensional, and com-
plex. Some of these dimensions can be represented on continua such as that from the positivistic and experimentally controlled (sometimes called quantitative) to the phenomenological and naturalistically documented (or qualitative). An alternative we have proposed (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) emphasizes four methodological dimensions: inductive to deductive, subjective to objective, generative to verificative, and constructive to enumerative. Others could be added.

12 In the remainder of this chapter, we further define what qualitative research is by delineating more sharply the specific type of qualitative research called ethnography. We use ethnographic design as a departure point because we believe that, within the array of social science research designs described as qualitative or interpretive, ethnography represents a case contrasting sharply with conventional quantitative designs. Ethnography probably is farthest to the generative, inductive, subjective, and constructive ends of the continua. Further, it is not, as many novice researchers assume, a synonym for any research design that uses participant observation, multiple methods of data collection, and/or interpretive techniques for collection and analysis of material.

13 Until recently, ethnographic research remained the most favored tool for anthropologists and for sociologists from the Chicago tradition. Although some of these researchers did study schools and educational activities in the course of other investigations, few concentrated on educational matters to the exclusion of other things. However, beginning in the 1960s, ethnographic and quasiethnographic designs were adapted to studies of children and child rearing (Whiting & Whiting, 1975), classroom interaction (Goetz, 1976, 1978; Jackson, 1968; LeCompte, 1978; Rist, 1970; Smith & Goeffrey, 1968), the activities of teachers and students (Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 1968; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Bronfenbrenner, 1970), and teaching-learning activities in general, inside and outside school (Leacock, 1969).

14 Ethnography’s emphasis on documentation and analysis of social change and process also proved useful in evaluations of educational innovation. By the late 1970s, ethnographic components were required as a part of the research design for many federally funded compensatory education programs (Fetterman & Pitman, 1986).

15 Although it met with much initial criticism in the ensuing 20 years, the ethnographic research design now has achieved legitimacy. In that time, however, the definition of what ethnographic research is all about has become as confused as that of qualitative research. First of all, the two terms are not equivalent. Much very good research in education is qualitative, but not ethnographic. Much research labeled ethnography is not ethnographic and does not need to be (Wolcott, 1988).

16 An extreme case analysis such as we present here permits exploration of the wide range of methods and techniques available to qualitative researchers, whether or not they wish to do an ethnography. It also may help people to decide whether the research question they wish to investigate mandates ethnographic design, or if peculiarities of settings, time lines, available resources, and population characteristics preclude its execution. [begin page 145]

17 We first discuss the conceptual and theoretical grounding of ethnography within anthropology and qualitative sociology. We then examine ethnography as a particular form of qualitative research, distinguish between ethnography and other forms of qualitative research, and indicate what we believe are particular strengths and weaknesses. In the last part of the chapter, we discuss methods of data analysis used in qualitative research, whether or not it is ethnographic.

Conceptual Characteristics Of Ethnography

18 There are five conceptual emphases marking and differentiating ethnography from other forms of human science research:

1. An orientation to the culture concept as a heuristic.
2. The use of phenomenological or participant meanings to organize the research;
3. A focus specifically on intimate relationships between researchers and the people studied;
4. Attention to the ethics of studying other humans; and
5. A belief that reality is contextual or relational, rather than fixed and position free.

Culture

19 In contrast to other research designs, such as the experiment and the sample survey, ethnography developed in tandem with a theoretical focus on culture (Fetterman, 1989; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Peacock, 1986; Stocking, 1983). Experimental and survey methods, on the other hand, are associated with the natural sciences and psychology in the former case and with sociology and social work in the latter. Ethnography evolved over the course of the 20th century as a means of examining and presenting the cultures of diverse groups of human beings.

20 The task investigators set for themselves was to learn what other people's cultures were and to describe those cultures in ways meaningful to those unable to indulge in firsthand observation. Ethnography, then, as it has come to be used by cultural anthropologists, denotes both a way of studying people — a process — and a way of presenting the results of the study — a product (Wolcott, 1975). Consequently, an investigator choosing ethnography as a way of studying people also chooses the culture concept as a way of organizing the results of the study. This association between process and product in ethnography results, we believe, in a tighter conceptual link between research design and research theory than can be found for any other research design in the human sciences.

21 Researchers with no interest in culture, then, would find no use for ethnographic design; their studies might be qualitative, but they would not be ethnographic. [begin page 146] While this might seem to be a limiting factor of the design, the culture construct itself is so broad that it informs and finds representation across many human science theories.

22 For many years, culture was associated with the social theory of structural functionalism (Abrahamson, 1978; Goetz & Hansen, 1974; Kaplan & Manners, 1972). This theory posits that within any discrete group, humans organize themselves into structures that perform tasks or functions that facilitate the maintenance and perpetuation of the overall group. Culture is constituted of patterns of and for behavior (Jacobs, 1987); it is viewed as the blueprint for organizing a group's structures and functions and for keeping the group operating. The blueprint is transferred from cultural expert to cultural novice through socialization and enculturation.

23 This process of cultural transmission allows groups to perpetuate themselves. Unfortunately, the functional theory of cultural transmission leaves open the question of how groups and their cultures change. One theoretical response to this was an application of biological evolutionism in the construct of cultural ecology, the theory that all social groups exist in social and natural environments and must adapt to both to survive. Change occurs through adaptation to variations in either the natural world or the social world (Netting, 1986); the process then becomes one of cultural acquisition, in which the individual plays an active part, rather than one of passive integration of what has been transmitted.

24 By the second half of the 20th century, diverse theoretical frameworks had been applied to the problem of defining, studying, and representing human culture (Garbarino, 1977). Marxism, for example, influenced a number of perspectives toward culture. One is cultural materialism, the theory that cultural abstractions are a function of the physical materials — natural and human-made — available to individuals in a group (Harris, 1968). Another is conflict theory, the premise that disorder and turmoil rather than order and stability are the basic characteristics of human groups and that it is differential access to resources that keeps groups stratified and humans in conflict and competition (Appelbaum, 1970). More recently, Marx's strongest influence on culture studies can be found in critical ethnography; this approach
has fostered studies investigating the interaction between individual activity, or agency, and the constraining or oppressive effect of social structures (Anderson, 1989).

25 A theory also drawing on distribution of resources, but without direct links to Marxism, is exchange theory (Blau, 1964). Culture here is viewed as the rules and expectations people use in conducting transactions with one another; as individuals become aware of the costs and benefits of various alternative choices in their interactions with one another, they select accordingly. Theoretical overlapping occurs, of course, between such constructs as cultural ecology and cultural materialism, although the origins of the ideas may be different.

26 Other theoretical work expanded the use of the culture concept in different directions. In the middle part of the century, anthropologists trained in psychodynamic and other psychological traditions sought connections between individuals and the groups with which they were affiliated (Harris, 1968). Termed culture-and-personality researchers, these investigators tried to find ways that individuals and their personalities may be a product of the culture in which they are reared.

27 Although theorists no longer assume that cultural patterns are simply and directly expressed in the human personality, researchers continue to seek the cultural connections between individuals and their groups. Cognitive anthropology (Holland & Quinn, 1987; Rogoff & Lave, 1984), ethnomethodology (Mehan & Wood, 1975), ethnoscience (Shweder & LeVine, 1984), and symbolic interactionism (Denzin, 1989) all provide theoretical frameworks for examining how humans manage and are managed by their cultures.

28 These theories, as well as others we have not discussed — for example, historical reconstruction (Kaplan & Manners, 1972) or French structuralism (Harris, 1968) — have complex, differing, sometimes incompatible philosophical roots and premises. They have all been used, however, to illuminate human culture and to guide ethnographic design and analysis. Many, but not all, of them share concerns for the three common philosophical premises that conventionally guide ethnographic inquiry: meaning, relationships and ethics, and reality.

Meaning

29 Although it has concrete, externally perceivable manifestations, culture is considered by most anthropologists to be an abstract concept. Its content must be inferred from careful attention to how people behave and interact in groups, to how people create and modify their social and physical worlds, and to how people communicate among themselves (Shweder & LeVine, 1984). Furthermore, to interpret correctly these observations, the cultural analyst must know what the observed behaviors and interactions, the creations and modifications, and the communications mean to the people creating them (Moerman, 1988).

30 Culture is seen as residing principally in the minds of the people who share a particular lifestyle. To identify that culture and to reconstruct it for others to examine requires that the analyst probe what phenomena mean to cultural participants. Even those theories most concerned with external representations of culture — cultural materialism or conflict theory, for example — must address the question of what behaviors, events, and artifacts mean to the people who construct them.

31 This preoccupation with what observations mean to the participants being studied may have roots in the social science theories just discussed. Phenomenology provides another rationale for requiring researchers to attend to meaning. This philosophy and its variants affected many late 19th- and early 20th-century theorists who were seeking ways to study and to explain the human world (Polkinghorne, 1983). The search for what a people's culture means to the people who live it thus became as serious a pursuit as a determination of the culture itself. Indeed, it was [begin page 148] inseparable from it. To know a culture means to understand what the culture is from the point of view of a participant (Geertz, 1973, 1983).
32 Of course, not all of what participants know about their cultures is carried consciously. Much cultural knowledge is implicit, covert, tacit, assumed. A continuing issue for ethnographers is how to reveal this kind of cultural knowledge while preserving, as much as possible, its meaning to cultural insiders. The danger here is that cultural assumptions apparent to the external observer may be merely a function of what is in the observer’s mind and not an authentic representation of the culture itself. One way that ethnographers confront this issue is by probing for what participants make of the covert pattern once it is revealed. There is a special satisfaction that comes with the response from a participant, “Yes, I’ve never thought of it before, but that is how we always do this. I think it comes from…”

Relationships

33 The preoccupation with meaning and the reliance on observation and questioning required for cultural analysis are related to the third substantive pattern of ethnographic design introduced above, the relationships that ethnographers build with the people they study (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Shaffir, Stebbins, & Turowetz, 1980). Although early descriptions of cultures around the world were composed from the accounts of missionaries, colonial officials, and other travelers, dissatisfaction with this material led anthropologists by the early years of the century to rely on their own firsthand accounts. This resulted in the tradition of living with members of a culture, developing face-to-face relationships with them, and depending on personal relationships for what were regarded as scientific data.

34 In tandem with the development of ethnography as an investigative device, then, was the issue of how the researcher ought to conduct personal relationships with those studied. The quandaries posed by this problem have been explored by most generations of field workers (Geertz, 1988; Wengle, 1988; Whitehead & Conaway, 1986). The stances taken toward the issue reflect Euro-American mores of the times as well as predominant theoretical frames.

35 In an analysis of the roles sociological field workers have taken toward their participants, Adler and Adler (1987) link the assumed detachment and favored neutrality of the Chicago school of qualitative sociology with theoretical concerns of the day, predominantly structural functional analyses of group organization. They contrast this with positions favored by existential sociologists, who represent variants of the phenomenological philosophy discussed previously. These theoreticians favor the assumption of roles that bring researchers inside groups, learning the culture from the perspective of a novice and letting the participant experts play the powerful roles of teacher-parent. However, some degree of detachment is advocated so that analysis can proceed from an outside perspective.

36 The third position discussed by the Adlers is that of the ethnmethodologist. Ethnmethodologists believe that in order to represent authentically the lifeways (begin page 149) of any group, the researcher must become, genuinely and sincerely, a member of the group. The relationships formed with participants must be regarded as permanent commitments. Only by experiencing the world just as the participant does can the researcher learn what the world is about. Furthermore, reports of the research must be directed to the participants themselves, who are the best judges of the quality of the research.

37 What the Adlers’ analysis emphasizes is that the philosophical and theoretical predispositions held by field workers influence how researchers interact with participants and the ethical and moral principles that guide their behavior. Although there is no single code of conduct or set of role requirements that ethnographers agree on, most ethnographers consciously adopt some considered relationship with their participants and attempt to guide their actions according to some ethical and moral principles (Deyhle, Hess, & LeCompte, 1992; Rynkiewich & Spradley, 1976; Smith, 1990; Soltis, 1990). In situations where ethnographers have neglected these issues, their work has been challenged by their peers.
Reality

38 A difficulty readily admitted by ethnographers in devising a uniform code of ethics for all fieldworkers is the value stance of cultural relativity that emerged with the development of cultural anthropology in this century. As anthropologists studied more cultures and learned of the investigations of others throughout the 20th century, they came to appreciate the diversity of human values and norms. This appreciation developed into a position that human behavior ought to be judged morally, ethically, and esthetically within the framework of the culture that produced it. Cultural relativists, some of whom may also advocate assessing a culture’s practices by external standards, begin examining behavior within the initial cultural context that produced it (e.g., Rorty, 1985).

39 The philosophical tradition most congruent with the anthropologists’ cultural relativism is phenomenology. As presented previously, this tradition views reality as fluid, dependent on the perspective of those attempting to describe it, multifaceted and layered. Knowledge depends on the characteristics of the knower as well as the known; what people know about the world can only be determined through the apparatus of the human mind and sensory perceptions. Values, likewise, are situation- and personnel-dependent. They can only be assessed within the context of the conditions that produce them.

40 The concern with local meanings has lately raised the issue of voice or authorship (Geertz, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1986; Richardson, 1990). In this view, reality is seen not as fixed or even as relative, but as relational, something that is person-specific and socially constructed (McLaren, 1989). Representing reality is not merely an epistemological problem, but an existential one: whose reality is to be presented, and by whom? Reality is seen as personally constructed and located in the combined experiences of many people. Truth resides in presentation of multiple realities, voices, or stories — including that of the researcher — none of which tells all, but the combined group of which may come closer to it (Marcus & Fisher, 1986).

41 For many ethnographers, phenomenology has provided a framework for the cultural relativism that developed primarily as a pragmatic response to field conditions. It is a rationale for what field workers believe they should do to obtain the data they seek and to produce authentic representations of the cultures they study. However, not all ethnographers embrace these views, and among some who do are those who retain a skepticism toward it.

42 Thus, it is a mistake to assume, as do many novice researchers, that all ethnographic work is phenomenological and/or presented exclusively from the perspective of the “Other” — the subject or group under study. Much ethnographic work in the past decades has been framed by a mix of assumptions about reality and knowledge. Some cultural material is presented and analyzed from a realist position, and other material from the same study is presented from alternative philosophical and theoretical views (e.g., van Maanen, 1988). Much of it has constituted a "top down" perspective; while the story told is ostensibly that recounted by the natives, the interpretive constructs and definitions that frame the account are those of the investigator, imposed upon the narrative.

43 What we want to emphasize here is that the ethnographic tradition in cultural and social anthropology is more than a research design. It is more than a set of conventions and practices for acquiring and analyzing data. Ethnography has substantive components. The ethnographic tradition is also a tradition bound to the study of a particular topic — culture — and informed by the frameworks of the theoretical perspectives and philosophical views discussed in this section.

44 Of course, not everyone who claims to practice ethnography is aware of these substantive elements. Of those who are, some choose to ignore this conceptual material and focus only on methodological elements. For example, in Great Britain human researchers commonly use ethnography as an alternative
label for qualitative research generally (e.g., Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), making no distinctions such as we have presented here. Rather, they emphasize ethnography in its research design mode, the subject of the next section.

Methodological Characteristics Of Ethnography

Methodological considerations in doing ethnography may be summarized as follows: the stance the researcher assumes vis-a-vis the people being studied; the degree to which the investigator exercises control over variations in the study population, events being examined, and categories of meaning informing the research; the point at which research questions are identified and theoretical perspectives are used in the research process; and the nature of the research [begin page 151] goal — description, analysis, generation and refinement of theory developed within a study, or testing and verification of hypotheses generated outside it.

Direct Participant Observation

Ethnography is a uniquely personal form of research; its most important means of data collection is participant observation. In this mode, researchers live among and take part in the daily activities of people, reconstructing their interactions and activities in field notes taken as soon as possible after their occurrence (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). In ethnography, as in no other form of investigation, the researcher is the instrument of data collection and analysis (Wolcott, 1975); there is no distancing device of questionnaire or one-way mirror to mediate between the researcher and those studied. Hence, the investigator’s personality, style of relating to others, and sense of ethics become critical in execution of the task.

Field Notes

Field notes consist of narrative descriptions of people, places, human and natural events, patterns of interaction, statements of value and belief, and the historical context in which the preceding takes place. They answer the journalist’s questions: Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? How many? Field notes can be written in notebooks, on file cards, with laptop computers, or on convenient scraps of paper. They are recorded on the spot, in convenient hideaways such as the researcher’s car or the rest room as soon as the researcher can escape from immediate interaction with participants, or they are reconstructed in the quiet of home at the end of the day. They are an ethnographer’s stock-in-trade and primary source of data.

In their roughest form, field notes are handwritten and often diarylike. They consist both of descriptive statements and researcher inferences. Standard practice requires the field worker to transcribe and type field notes at the end of each day, a process often as lengthy as the observations they represent. At this time, the researcher fills in the blanks, entering impressions that could not, for reasons of time or participant sensitivity, be recorded as they occurred.

Careful field workers keep the level of inference in descriptive field notes as low — or as close to concrete portrayal — as possible. They also separate entries for description, researcher opinion, and participant opinion. They also separate their hunches, conclusions, and emerging questions from narrative description. These are reserved to the category of sensitizing concepts for later data analysis. Many researchers suggest developing specific notational conventions to distinguish these diverse materials, such as using divided steno pads so that viewer impressions and inferences can be recorded on one side of the paper, separate from description on the other. An alternative is to use colored ink or underlining to denote researcher inferences, quotations to denote verbatim remarks of study participants, and nonquoted sentences for paraphrases or descriptive statements of observed events. [begin page 152] Regardless of the man
ner in which distinctions are noted in the written record, they must be scrupulously noted to keep the researcher as honest as possible and to demarcate any existing researcher biases.

Triangulation and Eclecticism in Data Collection Methods

50 McCall and Simmons (1969) emphasize that participant observation is not a single method of data collection. Participant observation is a combination of methods and techniques, involving genuinely social interaction in the field with participants, direct observation of relevant events, formal and informal interviewing, systematic counting, labeling and coding, and collection and analysis of documents and artifacts (p. 1). It may also involve use of photography, audio- and videotaping, and projective tests and other pencil-and-paper instruments.

51 An example of a well-documented study is Deyhle's ongoing research on Navajo dropouts and their community (1986, 1989, 1991). Over a period of four years, Deyhle has lived in the community, participating in a variety of ways — not only carrying out her research, but also attending festivals and celebrations at school and in the town, using the stores, recreational facilities, and amenities of the town, living for a summer with a shepherding family in a hogan, teaching university extension courses to teachers in the public schools, and masquerading as a high school student for a semester. These and other roles permitted her to interview parents, students, teachers, social service workers, public officials, and a whole range of community residents — in short, everyone who had anything to do with young people.

52 She also collected documentary materials — grades; school records of discipline, attendance, transfers, and health data; student products and journals; textbooks; published records of court cases involving the school district; and textbook materials. In addition, she obtained information about the community from newspapers, records of consumption and expenditure patterns from the local market, including grocery store, health statistics, historical records, analysis of land use patterns, migration, employment, and demographic change. Eclecticism such as this is not atypical in competent ethnography; it is one of its hallmarks (Wilson, 1977).

53 Eclecticism also facilitates another characteristic of ethnographic research: the corroborative confirmation of findings by means of triangulation (Denzin, 1978). In land surveying, physical objects are located exactly by sighting, or triangulating, along several points, rather than just one location. Triangulation in social science research is similar, in that conclusions are assumed to be accurate only if they can be confirmed or corroborated by more than one data source.

54 For example, a researcher might require five or six separate slices of data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) or data points to corroborate the accuracy of a school principal's assessment of a particular girl as the most well-liked senior in the school. That description must be held in question until it can be determined what the principal means by the term well-liked. Then, student definitions of the term well-liked must be elicited. If the principal's definition corresponds to that of the students, and if the designation of popularity is corroborated by further information such as a sociometric analysis, an opinion survey of students, and an analysis of the types of activities the yearbook shows her to be involved in, then it can be assumed that the principal's assessment corresponds to what is generally believed to be true in that school. Triangulation, then, is a means of proof achieved by logical argument and the mustering of alternative sources of empirical evidence.

Location in Unmanipulated, Naturalistic Settings

55 Ethnographies rarely involve the deliberate manipulation of people or events to test researcher hypotheses or conclusions. To the contrary, ethnographers are so concerned with reactivity, or observer effects, that
they spend much time either trying to avoid being obtrusive or documenting the unavoidable consequences of their presence in the field setting. This is a great strength of ethnographic design, because its conclusions are drawn from analysis of what happens in the hurly-burly of everyday life, not from events in the rarified atmosphere of a laboratory or controlled experiment. “Noise,” confounding factors, and sources of variance — all are invited into an ethnographic design, there to be watched so that their impact can be documented. As has been emphasized, however (Denzin, 1978; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), this strength in explanation can be a weakness in establishing causality.

**Long-Term Residence and Total Immersion in the Field**

56 Although this canon is honored more in the breach than in practice, ethnographers earn their stripes by surviving, as Deyhie has, long periods of isolated living on participant terms among the people they study (Foster, Scudder, Colson, & Kemper, 1979). An initial tour may be supplemented by periodic revisits, such as Boas’s periodic trips to the Kwakiutl, Mead’s return to Manus after 25 years (Mead, 1956), or the Spindlers’ (1992) restudy of Burgbach. The goals of long-term residence are to establish deep understanding of the lifeways of another culture, including learning the language; to ensure that the researcher is observing stable patterns of behavior and belief, not just those of the moment; and to reduce the reactivity produced by the presence of a stranger.

57 Qualitative research in general, and ethnography in particular, is time consuming, especially if phenomenological approaches to meaning are used. Hence the need for the researcher — as instrument — to be present in the field site for prolonged periods.

**Focus on Small and Bounded Populations**

58 The classic ethnography was carried out by an anthropologist studying a small, geographically bounded, and exotic community — preferably a previously unstudied tribe located on a very small island. However, ethnography has come home, not only to Westernized and urban areas, but in its application to phenomena other than whole communities (Messerschmidt, 1981). For ethnographers, the question of population size is more a consideration of feasibility of execution than it is one of design rigor or the need for generalizability.

59 This is because the research purpose usually is aimed at generation of hypotheses rather than testing; the questions asked require depth of understanding and time for execution rather than assurance of representativeness and application to larger arenas. Where generalizations are made, they are offered as comparisons among case studies, made as consistent as possible in use of terminology and design. As Margaret Mead put it, "the question is not whether the group studied is representative of any particular thing or group, but what it represents itself to be" (quoted in Wolcott, 1988, pp. 199-200).

60 These, then, summarize the distinctive design characteristics of ethnographic research. They are necessary, but not sufficient to qualify a project as ethnographic. In other words, a research project might include all of these characteristics, and thus constitute a very good qualitative study. However, if the study lacked the conceptual focus on culture, relationships, ethics, and meaning, it would not be an ethnography.

**Analytic Characteristics Of Qualitative Design In General And Ethnography In Particular**

61 The ways that ethnographers and other qualitative researchers analyze data are diverse, idiosyncratic, and tailored to the nature of the material being examined and the questions asked of it. Much qualitative anal-
ysis, however, can be viewed as some variation of perusing the data, pulling them apart for closer exami-
nation, and grouping them. A few gifted ethnographers seem able to do this mentally, without benefit of
paper and pencil. For most, however, this requires tedious hours of handling massive amounts of data. We
have, perhaps cavalierly, referred to this process of reduction as data crunching.

62 Wrestling thousands of pages of field notes and other documentation into something reportable — a jour-
nal article, an anthology chapter, or even a monograph — is one of the most daunting challenges of this
form of inquiry. The analytic approaches used by ethnographers are similar to what other qualitative
researchers use. What is different is the perspective from which the analysis is undertaken; ethnographic
analysis is always informed by some notion of culture. As Wolcott (1988) puts it, a study becomes ethnog-
graphic only in the analysis and write-up phases of the study. [begin page 155]

Recursivity

63 Qualitative studies, including ethnographies, are distinguished from other kinds of social science research
by the stage at which analysis takes place. Experimental researchers collect all their data first, then begin
the process of analysis; indeed, they are enjoined from any manipulation of data or attempts to explain
what has been learned during the collection process, for fear of biasing the results. However, in a switch
that is probably the most difficult for the positivistically minded inquirer to incorporate, qualitative
researchers analyze material throughout the research project.

64 Qualitative studies often necessarily are descriptive because they involve examining events or phenomena
not fully studied. Thus, they begin less with a search for answers than with an attempt to frame initial
questions, or theories. The analytic processes qualitative researchers use are what we have called recursive
(Borman, LeCompte, & Goetz, 1986; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984); they involve recycling from initial ques-
tion (hypothesis) formulation to data collection in answer to the initial questions, to reformulation of
questions on the basis of new data, and renewed data collection.

65 These techniques are used from the very start of the inquiry process, rather than being relegated to the
end. In this mode, working hypotheses are formulated and reformulated throughout the study. Each suc-
ceeding hypothesis, or research question, is informed by the preceding ones and refines, modifies, or
alters the direction of the research, in accordance with corrective feedback from the field. If a question
does not work, if it is nonsensical, it is modified or discarded in favor of others conforming more closely
to what is encountered in the field.

66 The cognitive processes involved in recursive analysis are the same ones we elsewhere describe as those
used in theorizing (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984): perceiving, or looking at things with the ethnographer's
studied naiveté; describing, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, and ordering; establishing relationships
and linkages among items or constructs, interpreting data, integrating results with past research, and
speculating about the future. These cognitive processes have been lumped more formally into general
analytic procedures called constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), analytic induction (Znaniecki,
1934), sequential selection, negative and discrepant case analysis, typological analysis (Goetz &
LeCompte, 1984), and constitutive ethnography (Mehan, 1979).

Forms of Qualitative Data Analysis

67 Constant comparison is a kind of inductive category coding, in which the researcher simultaneously com-
pares all items identified with all others, so as to determine which ones belong together and which consti-
tute new categories. By contrast, analytic induction involves scanning data for categories, establishing
relationships, and developing hypotheses on the basis of the initial data collected. [begin page 156] In
sequential selection, successive subpopulations of persons, events, artifacts, or things that have become of interest as a study progresses are defined and examined. It facilitates the development of emergent constructs and theories and permits elimination of inadequate initial descriptions or formulations.

68 The techniques most often used involve a systematic search for discordant and negative cases, which permit the researcher to refine, modify, or discard a construct or category. Typological analysis involves dividing everything observed into groups based on substantive attributes for disaggregation and association. Constitutive ethnography, informed by symbolic interactionism, is directed to the “description of the social organization of routine, everyday events . . . [and] the interactional work of participants that assembles the structure of these events” (Mehan, 1979, p. 8). Its goal is to develop a comprehensive analysis of an entire phenomenon (p. 20). In practice, these general analytic procedures overlap, and researchers engage in all of them simultaneously and sequentially during data analysis, construct and category identification, and the subsequent formation of working hypotheses.

69 Later in this paper, we discuss how ethnographers or qualitative researchers use these techniques recursively in their data analysis, moving from what we have called the item level of aggregation to the pattern level. From there, we discuss how researchers integrate their findings with existing knowledge bases and generate new ideas and questions.

The Item Level of Analysis

70 The item level of analysis is the first step in the analytic process. Its purpose is to delineate the things within a research scene; it is the first step on the road to generation of working hypotheses and subsequent grounded theory. Before researchers can make affirmative statements about how the world or any part of it works, they must know what it is. The item, or micro, level of analysis accomplishes just that.

71 At the micro level, the investigator must learn what is out there by isolating and identifying the constituent parts of a universe. This is the process of determining the units of analysis for a study. Items, or units of analysis, are perceptible divisions between the items or constructs discovered in the process of scanning through the data collected in a study. They guide the collection of further data, because initial units of analysis constitute sensitizing or emerging categories on which subsequent investigation is based (Blumer, 1969).

72 They also serve to reduce masses of raw data to a manageable form prior to the development of classificatory schemes or taxonomies and typologies in the later stages of data analysis. Theorizing, in the form of comparing and contrasting, aggregating and ordering, is used in the item level stage of data analysis as a tool to establish what is present, where it occurs, when it occurs, how many “its” are present, and with whom or what they associate. The result of the item level of analysis is a set of categories.

73 For example, in their study of undergraduates in an innovative teacher-training program, LeCompte and Ginsburg (1987) first identified all of the individuals whom students said had had a significant influence on their student teaching. This activity generated a list of types of individuals, which in turn constituted the first set of categories delineated for the study. It included such items or units as boyfriends and girlfriends, spouses, master or supervising teachers, professors, instructors, student peers, parents, other relatives, and adult friends or mentors. This set of categories then permitted the researchers to group the individual students according to whether they looked to their personal friends or to professional models as sources on which to model their teaching behavior. Second, LeCompte and Ginsburg divided the student population itself into categories according to the orientations individuals had toward the program and their motivations for being in it.
Developing categories in the item level of analysis is recursive, in that it requires the researcher to go through a repetitive and cyclical process of questioning, seeking answers, refining original questions on the basis of incoming data, raising new ones, seeking new answers, and on the basis of the new answers, developing questions yet again. Investigators ask, “Is there anything I'm missing? Have I left anything or anybody out? Have I made clear distinctions between this group and that one? Is the item I am looking at a separate item, or simply a part of something larger?” Researchers use information from previous studies — their own and others’ — as refining constructs in this process.

The Pattern Level of Analysis

As the item level of analysis progresses, patterns begin to emerge from the data. Patterns exist when things seem to group together, associate with each other, and be related, physically, causally, temporally, or on other significant bases. Although the pattern level of analysis continues to use the initial tools of theorizing — comparing, contrasting, ordering, aggregating — recursively, it also requires that the researcher begin to establish linkages and to make associations among the items found in initial stages of data analysis.

These linkages constitute working hypotheses; they help to explain why people act as they do or why things seem to be happening as they do in the field site. Patterns can be typologies of people, such as an array of community college faculty; they can be constructs, like interdependence of the strands in the lives of adult women graduate students; or they can be an organizing principle, such as the salience of age of dependent children for the career development and self-identification of adult women. Patterns most frequently emerge because they represent those items occurring most frequently or because they most obviously cluster together. Uncovering them requires the same cognitive processes discussed previously; instead of being used to delineate discrete items one from the other, they are, in this case, used [begin page 158] to identify linkages among items and underlying sources of covariance or association. Researchers are aided in this processes by the theorizing tools of inference and speculation and sometimes by statistical or mathematical manipulations.

In her study of Native American dropouts, Deyhle (1986, 1989, 1991) began with constructs identified as salient from the literature on school leaving, such as family background, social class status, grades, achievement test scores, and rates of absenteeism. She interview a number of individuals to see if these constructs were relevant in completion of high school for this population. Feedback from the field led her to believe that none of these factors alone was sufficient to prevent graduation. The data did, however, permit her to identify a given organizing principle, or pattern, helping explain some of the cultural conflicts between parents of Navajo students and Anglo school personnel.

This pattern represented radically different modes of child rearing; school people regarded the failure of Navajo parents to supervise closely their teenage children as "uncaring" and irresponsible; however, this treatment was a culturally appropriate pattern of treating postpubescent youngsters as mature adults. From this theme or pattern, a series of hypotheses were developed, ranging from the impact of cultural differences on dropout behavior to theories about the efficacy of dropout programs stressing parent involvement. Thus, the phenomenon of dropping out was first described in terms of previously identified individual behaviors or responses — items or units of analysis — which were then tested against the responses found in the field, and modified on the basis of the feedback. This led to a new hypothesis about parent behavior. Investigation of that hypothesis led to new and more comprehensive explanations of dropping out, which included the patterns of cultural difference (Deyhle, 1991).
Interpretation and Integration of Results with Previous Research

79 The final steps in the analytic process — and the last ones on the road to generation of grounded theory — involve interpretation of results in the specific study and integration of what has been learned with previous research. In this stage of the process, researchers determine the extent to which their own work confirms what has been done before, where it fails to fit past research, and to what extent their own research informs future investigation or generates hypotheses for future research. Once again, the same recursive processes outlined previously for the item and pattern levels of analysis come into play, though they are augmented by sampling procedures facilitating examination of prior work.

80 First, theoretical and substantive sampling (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) is used. This involves a careful search for theories or empirical research best matching the study at hand. Analysis of substantive studies is an attempt to determine, by comparative analysis, the degree to which a study differs from those that have come before, using the present findings to refine, amplify, modify, or refute earlier work. Theoretical sampling involves a careful search for theories best matching the data [begin page 159] obtained for the given study; those that most closely match the data must be given serious consideration. However, data often do not match; in these cases, alternative hypotheses that are more adequate are generated for testing in the future. In any case, the first stages of interpretation and integration involve determining which other studies resemble the one at hand and which ones inform the existing study or could help elucidate it. Once this has been accomplished, the hardest step of all must be taken/hard because it represents a shift in cognitive approaches from the convergent thinking most congenial to rigorous researchers into one that is more playful, daring, and risky.

81 Hypothesis generation is the realm entered when previous formulations do not fit and new ones must be found. Often this requires making inferences and speculations beyond the strict confines of the data obtained in the given study; for this reason, many researchers find it difficult to do. The process is, however, the essence of creative thinking, because it requires that old categories be redesigned, sometimes by the use of metaphors, similes, and analogies helping to make novel connections between what the researcher is trying to describe and other, more familiar phenomena. Lutz (1982), for example, compared the dynamics of tenure and promotions procedures in higher education to witchcraft rituals among tribal peoples to highlight the degree of wishful thinking, manipulation, and talisman production that the former activities required.

82 Theory generation also requires that the items in a study be linked and relinked in ways that the researcher never thought possible, just to see if in so doing, new light might be shed on the subject. It is like looking at the data upside down.

Metaphor, Simile, and Analogy

83 Part of the playfulness, as well as of the power, of ethnography is in its use of metaphor, simile, and analogy to clarify meanings and make them vivid. Ethnography strives for the sensitizing device of “making the familiar strange and making the strange familiar” (Erickson, 1973) to researchers during the data collection and analysis phases of the research; metaphor, simile, and analogy do the same thing for the recipients of the research product.

84 By juxtaposing odd items and drawing out similarities where there initially seem to be no connections at all, the researchers introduce readers to the same feelings of strangeness that the researchers experienced in the field. One example is the analogy between witchcraft and tenure and promotion policies in universities cited previously (Lutz, 1982). Although no one would claim that untenured professors use witchcraft to achieve their objective of secure employment, describing their activities as avoidance rituals, charms,
taboos, and shamanism, as Lutz does, elucidates practices all too familiar to be seen, at least initially, in a new light. The cognitive process used is comparison, which is the hallmark of ethnographic research.

85 These analytic characteristics typify ethnography, but once again, they also typify other types of qualitative research, and as such, do not constitute its particular uniqueness. Alone, they are not sufficient.

Conclusion

86 Characterizing ethnography, deciding what is and is not ethnographic, requires a collection of attributes — conceptual and methodological. Furthermore, because of the diversity of work undertaken by those considering themselves to be ethnographers, studies vary in the extent to which differing attributes are present. This, we believe, is a strength of the approach to human inquiry — researchers adapt the design to the contingencies of research questions, of characteristics of those studied, and of the nature and resources of the inquirers themselves.

87 Although ethnography may represent an extreme variant of qualitative research, the characteristics of design we have discussed here are shared to some degree with other kinds of qualitative inquiry. What makes an investigation qualitative, is a function of conceptual, methodological, and analytic factors. The term qualitative for research can be misleading; to some it implies that research that is not qualitative lacks quality; to others it implies approaches that use no quantification of data at all. Neither of these implications is intended by most qualitative methodologists.

88 The term qualitative refers to human science research that avoids experimental manipulation and laboratory settings. Qualitative research has come to denote any investigation into subjective issues, those involving attitudes, values, beliefs, and meaning. Hence, research using interviews, surveys, questionnaires, content analysis of documents and behavior, nonparticipant and participant observation has all been designated as qualitative.

89 In the past, research using these methods erroneously has been termed nonempirical. The term empirical, however, refers only to whether the phenomena under consideration are capable of being observed through human senses and experiences, not to a distinction between issues of meaning, feelings, or attitudes and those of behavior, fact, or hard description. Given this definition, most human science research other than theoretical model building is empirical, regardless of the research design used. Qualitative research design, with its emphasis on description, on recording the flow of experience from the participants’ point of view, is -- we believe -- the epitome of empirical inquiry. It addresses the question, What is happening here? It provides the information that makes it possible to proceed to the issues of how these things happen, why they happen, and to what ends.

References


