SARAH J. TRACY

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

COLLECTING EVIDENCE, CRAFTING ANALYSIS, COMMUNICATING IMPACT

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I dedicate this book to all my past students, research participants, mentors, and colleagues who have taught me that anything worth doing well is worth doing badly in the beginning.

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Entering the conversation of qualitative research

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How is qualitative research best understood or described? How is it different from other kinds of research? There is no single answer, but the following tale illustrates the unique nature of qualitative methods and how my approach is distinct from other types of empirical research.

> I peer through a fractured window. Pad and pencil in hand, I squint through the cracked glass. When I step to the side or even slightly move my head, I see something different – a smirk here, a wink of an eye there. At the same time, the glass provides a reflection of me trying to observe what is beyond. I note my sometimes curious, sometimes bewildered reactions.
>
> I see a door and run inside and throughout the scene; I am a character, almost. I trip. I get up. I ask others what they're doing, what's going on. Some look at me quizzically. Others smile. I may be too naïve to understand it by myself. They quietly accommodate me. Every once in a while, I ask the participants about their actions or point out something that seems confusing. Some are irritated. Others explain.
>
> Effusive with thanks, I leave the scene. I can only hope they will allow my work with them to continue. I dash home to write up fieldnotes. Despite my best efforts, the text glosses the complexity and richness of the scene. I'll never be able to write *the* story of what is going on. The best I can do is open up the story through one telling of my own.

This tale makes clear several key notions of qualitative inquiry. For instance, it exemplifies how every scene is not clearly recordable, but is fractured and impossible to fully capture. Depending on where researchers stand (literally or figuratively), they will see something different. Further, ethnographers themselves participate in the context, but they rarely do so inconspicuously. They ask questions and watch. Some participants may appreciate their presence, while others do not. Through these processes – some of which are fun, others challenging – qualitative researchers do their best to create a significant representation of the scene.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the key characteristics of qualitative inquiry. In doing so it overviews qualitative terminology, discusses how qualitative research focuses on action and structure, examines significant historical issues, and concludes with current controversies that situate qualitative methods today.

The nature of qualitative research

As discussed in Chapter 1, qualitative research focuses on the thick description of context and often emerges from situated problems in the field. One of the best ways to understand qualitative research is by becoming aware of how it differs from other types of research. Here I compare inductive and deductive reasoning, qualitative and quantitative research, and action and structure.

Inductive/emic vs. deductive/etic approaches

In logic, reasoning is often categorized as either inductive (a bottom-up, "little-to-big" approach) or deductive (a top-down, "big-to-little" approach). In qualitative methods, we often speak of **emic** understandings of the scene, which means that behavior is described from the actor's point of view and is context-specific. This is contrasted with **etic** understandings, in which researchers describe behavior in terms of external criteria that are already derived and not specific to a given culture. A good way to remember the difference between these approaches is that inductive and EMic research refers to meanings that EMerge from the field. In contrast, a deductive and ETic research begins with External Theories (presuppositions or criteria) to determine and frame meanings.

Researchers using an inductive emic approach (a) begin with observing specific interactions; (b) conceptualize general patterns from these observations; (c) make tentative claims (that are then re-examined in the field); and (d) draw conclusions that build theory. What does an emic and inductive approach look like in action? Suppose you were studying romantic relationships amongst college students. Research could begin with gathering specific interactions or conversations, or with asking couples to describe their most common disagreements. Then the researcher would analyze these data to find and make claims about patterns. Only after this data immersion would the researcher provide a conclusion that could add to theory. For instance, after analyzing multiple conversations the researcher might conclude that today's college students frame their relationships in terms of "hooking up" more frequently than they did 15 years ago, when "dating" was a more common way to frame courtship.

This approach contrasts with deductive reasoning, in which researchers (a) begin with a broad or general theory; (b) make an educated guess or a hypothesis about the social world on the basis of this theory; (c) conduct research that tests the hypothesis; and (d) use the evidence gathered from that research to confirm or disconfirm the original theory. A researcher using the deductive and etic approach would use predetermined models or explanations and would make sense of the contextual behavior through these lenses. For example, a romantic relationship researcher could start from Baxter's (1990) dialectical theory and hypothesize that all couples, regardless of their satisfaction level, must manage relational dialectics such as autonomy vs. connectedness. Then the researcher could examine how the couple's most common disagreements aligned with, contrasted with, or extended relational dialectic theory.

Most social science research involves both inductive and deductive reasoning. Furthermore, qualitative research *can* work with both approaches. However, qualitative approaches tend to be contextual and generally they use inductive, emic approaches to understand local meanings and rules for behavior. At the same time, many researchers will turn to established theoretical models after they have examined their data, to see how emergent findings extend or complicate existing theories. They may also "hold on loosely" to developed models as they enter the analysis of qualitative data, where these models sensitize them to potential meanings.

Action and structure

When studying a context, qualitative researchers examine people's actions (local performances) and the structures (informal guidelines and formal rules) that encourage, shape, and constrain such actions. Different researchers discuss this action–structure duality using a variety of terms. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) talk about contextual "performances" and structuring "practices." Discourse scholars use the term "*d*iscourses" with a small "d" to refer to everyday talk and text and "*D*iscourses" with a big "D" to refer to larger systems of thought (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). An example of a performance or small-d discourse is the action of facing the door when standing in an elevator. A structuring practice or big-D discourse is the socialized norm or unwritten rule that facing the door (rather than facing the sides, the back wall, or other people) is the appropriate, polite, and normal way to stand in an elevator.

Despite the different terminologies, for our purposes I use the term **action** to refer to contextual talk, texts, and interactions (e.g. documents, emails, verbal routines, text messages, and comments) and **structure** to refer to enduring schools of knowledge, societal norms, and myths. Action and structure continuously construct and reflect upon each

CONSIDER THIS 2.1

Why am I standing in line?

Action and structure can be illustrated through the simple example of standing in line. In most Western nations, people learn to stand in line (for buses, ticket booths, or financial aid offices) through authoritative messages, informal admonitions, official documents, and printed signs. Most of us, at some time in our lives, have heard: "Don't cut in line!" or "Get to the back of the line!" Because of continual rules, reminders, and practices of line-standing, people often form lines even when the formal authority is absent (e.g. waiting overnight for concert tickets). In this way the line-standing structure is reinforced.

People begin to act and interpret the world – as well as judge others – via structures that normalize certain behaviors as being more moral and natural than others. People who stand in line are evaluated as polite and good, and those who do not are judged as rude and poorly behaved. In this process, "standing in line" creates a grand narrative that is helpful in some ways, but makes it difficult to imagine alternative possibilities.

When I worked on a cruise ship for eight months, I observed line behavior numerous times each week. In many situations, standing in line was appropriate (e.g. when passengers had to wait for a tender boat to get to shore). However, I also noticed inappropriate line-standing. Some passengers joined a long line for the evening's show at one entrance when an adjacent entrance had no line at all. Lines formed at the end of food buffet tables when, because of the repetition of the same dishes several times along a table, it would have been more appropriate to approach the table in groups scattered at different angles.

Passengers would occasionally go to the back of a line without even knowing what the line was for. This was the case especially in complex or new situations, such as when passengers first embarked. Some would join other passengers, who stood in line at the main reception desk, even though they already had everything they needed to go straight to their room. They followed the structure they had been accustomed to for their entire life (moreover, they had repeatedly followed it in the preceding hours) and assumed that "getting to the back of the line" was an acceptable and moral behavior – even when it was unnecessary.

This example shows how action and structure are cyclical and co-constitutive. The repeated *actions* of getting into line create a *structure* of line-standing regarded as appropriate. This, in turn, encourages more line-forming *action*, and so on. The actions and the structures are helpful in some ways, but when they become mindless and habitual they can lead to bizarre, inappropriate, and sometimes problematic responses to a situation.

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other. Language and actions cannot be separated from the way knowledge is institutionalized and produced (Du Gay, 2007), and this is illustrated in Consider This 2.1.

Action and structure relate to qualitative methods in several ways. First, qualitative researchers investigate action through close examinations of everyday mundane practices, talk, and interaction – such as line-standing behavior. They take as a guiding premise that one cannot *not* perform or communicate. At the same time, qualitative researchers examine structures as **grand narratives** – systems of stories driven by our formal expectations for things to unfold in a particular way. The continued domination of certain ways of being over time creates normalcy, powerful ideologies, assumptions about the truth, and larger

EXERCISE 2.1

Action vs. structure

1 What are some of the common *structures* (rules, expectations, and grand narratives) for the typical college classroom?

2 What are the actions and performances that support these structures? Which ones are obvious? Which ones are hidden or less obvious?

3 How do these actions and structures create a helpful classroom culture or climate?

4 How are the actions and structures constraining, or potentially problematic?

discourses of power (Eisenberg, 2007). It's much easier to note action than to notice the larger structures – as structures become taken for granted and second nature. However, a key part of qualitative research is highlighting the existence of these structures and theorizing the purposes served by their acceptance as normal.

For example, a researcher may note how historical norms about appropriate "first-date" behavior suggest that people should avoid using their hand-held electronic devices during that date. However, the researcher may also note that people resist and reshape these expectations, and in fact regularly use their hand-held devices during first dates, without any intended or perceived offense. Qualitative researchers would take note of these everyday actions and would also examine how they maintain, transform, and are shaped by larger structures and norms. By examining these dualities, researchers may open up windows for transformation and change.

Comparing qualitative and quantitative methods

One of the most common ways in which qualitative research is understood is through comparison with key features of **quantitative methods**. Quantitative research transforms data – including conversations, actions, media stories, facial twitches, or any other social or physical activity – into numbers. Quantitative methodologies employ measurement and statistics to develop mathematical models and predictions.

A quantitative researcher, for instance, may aggregate survey answers to measure how often respondents engage in a certain activity, or how much they prefer a certain product. Interaction may be observed in the laboratory, or it may be collected physiologically and examined in terms of how many times participants engage in various activities, or how much of a hormone is detected in their saliva (Floyd, Pauley, & Hesse, 2010). Quantitative researchers may also use field data – for example by studying the drinking patterns of patrons in bars or coffee shops. However, in contrast to a qualitative thick description of the scene, quantitative research is usually driven by questions of scale of the type "How much?" and "How often?" For qualitative researchers, counting and transforming data into numbers are much less frequent activities.

Another key difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is the role each one gives to the researcher. In quantitative research, the research instrument and the researcher controlling the instrument are two separate and distinctly different entities. For instance, the nurse is separate from the research instrument of the thermometer, the

biologist watches but is separate from a chemical catalyst, and a social scientist is separate from a survey that measures participant attitudes. As noted in Chapter 1, in qualitative methods the researcher *is* the instrument. Observations are registered *through* the researcher's mind and body. In such circumstances, self-reflexivity about one's goals, interests, proclivities, and biases is especially important.

Finally – and this is something we will cover in greater detail in Chapters 12 and 13 – the representation of the methodology, findings, and discussions of qualitative research differs from that of quantitative research. Articles that report statistical studies usually separate out the description of the research instrument (say, a survey) from a report on the findings (often represented in charts and graphs). In contrast, in qualitative research reports, the description of the research methods often flows into the stories, observations, and interactions collected. Qualitative researchers do not reserve the writing for the end of the project, using it as a way to reflect on their already discovered results. Rather they write in the process of collecting the data, analyzing, reflecting, and inquiring.

Some researchers choose one method over the other. However, it is not absolutely necessary to confine oneself to either qualitative or quantitative research. Some of the strongest research programs are built upon multiple methods of data collection (Abbott, 2004). For instance, to understand the concept of workplace bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009), researchers have used a quantitative survey to document its prevalence and its most common characteristics, and qualitative interviews to understand the feelings associated with bullying and the ways targets try to make sense of abuse and combat it.

The key questions to consider when choosing a research methodology and approach are: "What types of methods are best suited for the goals of my research project?" and "Which methodologies am I most equipped to use, or most attracted to?" Methodology is a tool. Just like a hammer is a better tool than a screwdriver for banging a nail into a wall, qualitative methodology is better than quantitative methodology for richly describing a scene, or for understanding the stories people use to narrate their lives. But sometimes two tools can do a job well. For instance, an artist could use chalk, markers, paint, or clay. The choice depends in part on the goal of the piece and in part on the artist's preferred medium. Likewise, choosing which methodology to use depends on the research goals as well as on your personal proclivities, preferences, and talents.

Key characteristics of the qualitative research process

What does qualitative research actually look like, and how does it proceed? In this section I briefly discuss several key characteristics of the qualitative research process, including gestalt, bricolage, research as a funnel, and the use of sensitizing concepts. These are not methods in and of themselves, but central characteristics that mark many of the theories and approaches used in qualitative research.

Gestalt

Qualitative researchers approach cultures holistically, or as **gestalt** – a German word meaning "essence of form or shape," but whose philosophical and psychological underpinnings (what is widely known as "gestaltism") make it untranslatable; hence it has

Figure 2.1 This image represents an example of a person's predisposition to organize pieces of information into more than just a collection of its separate parts. Do you see two faces, a vase, or both?
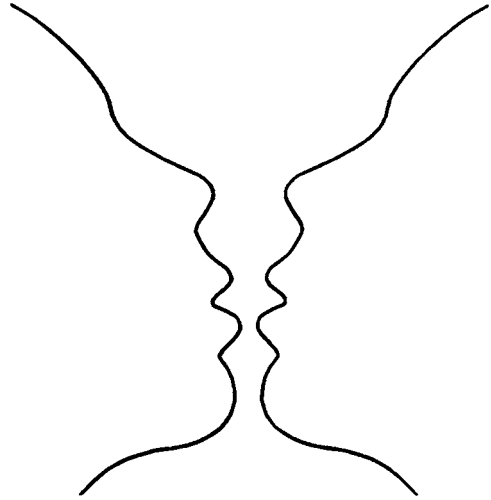
been appropriated as such in English and many other European languages. Roughly speaking, it captures people's tendency to piece together various parts into an integrated system or culture. The meaning of these systems comes through their interdependence and integration: the perceived whole is more than a sum of its parts (see Figure 2.1).

A gestalt approach suggests that examining a culture's elements as integrated together is preferable to parsing them out as separate variables. In other words, one aspect of a culture is best understood *in relation to* others. Participant observation is an excellent method for understanding gestalt meanings, but ethnographers may also use statistics and quantitative approaches to complement their qualitative study of a culture. For instance, Geertz (1973) counted and statistically analyzed the different types of bets made by Bali men during cockfights, and this analysis played a key role in his interpretation.

Bricolage

Second, qualitative methods establish the researcher as a "bricoleur." **Bricolage** is "a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4; see also Derrida, 1978). In other words, qualitative researchers are like quilters, borrowing and interweaving viewpoints and multiple perspectives. They make do with a variety of data – all of which are partial and mismatched – in order to construct a meaningful, aesthetically pleasing, and useful research synthesis (see Figure 2.2). This means that qualitative researchers are flexible, creative, and make the most of the information available, whether that includes interviews, observations, documents, websites, or archival material.

A qualitative researcher using the concept of bricolage makes use of various data in order to create an interesting whole. For instance, as she begins with the examination of advertisements for products that help women look younger, Trethewey (2001) asks what happens when we accept as normal the grand narrative that suggests that "getting older" equals "decline." She answers the question through interviews with women in mid-life and by showing how their views of aging both resist and reinforce the notion that aging and showing one's true age is problematic. As illustrated through Trethewey's use of multiple types of data (advertisements, interviews, observations), the qualitative researcher attempts to create meaning out of a variety of practices and performances available to her.

Figure 2.2 This image from the Garbage Museum pictures the "Trashosaurus." This piece of art is an example of bricolage in that it borrows and uses multiple items – items that have been "trash" on their own – to create a delightful and moving piece of art. Reproduced by permission of the Connecticut Resources Recovery Authority.

Finally, another way to consider bricolage is in terms of cooking. Imagine searching inside the refrigerator and finding the remainders of a rotisserie chicken, a heel of cheddar cheese, a half-eaten can of black beans, and some salsa. Most people might only see here leftovers and exclaim, "We've got to go the store, there's nothing to eat!" But a chef who is a bricoleur will see something else. By piecing together these bits, along with a can of chicken broth, a handful of corn chips, and some packets of garlic salt and hot pepper flakes from last week's pizza delivery, the bricoleur chef creates a wonderful chicken tortilla soup. Similarly, the qualitative researcher creates something beautiful and significant from the ingredients that show up in the "fridge" – the data – and therefore she is a bricoleur.

The funnel metaphor

Another metaphor helpful for illustrating the process of qualitative inquiry is that of the funnel. Like a funnel, qualitative inquiry usually begins with a broad and wide-open research question – such as "What is going on here?" By starting broad, researchers examine from the start a wide range of behavior, attuning themselves to a variety of interesting issues and circumstances that come from the field. Then, as they further scout the scene and collect more data, they slowly but surely circle through the funnel, narrowing their focus. Through ongoing analysis, interpretation, and collection of data, the purpose of the study becomes more distinct.

Given that the initial focus of a research study is quite broad, investigators must be flexible to contingencies in the scene. Every research project is different, and the practices that worked well in one scene may not work in another. For instance, some scenes may allow the researcher to act as him-/herself (e.g. hanging out at a concert), while a scene more difficult to access (e.g. a presidential press conference) may require him/her to dress or act in a different way from the usual.

When I conducted research with correctional officers, I purposely wore nondescript, baggy, and loose clothing, I tied my hair back in a ponytail, and I avoided any type of glitzy makeup. I did this so that I may blend in with inmates and officers and hopefully avoid any attention related to gender, age, or sex. This was much different from the persona I displayed when working and conducting research on a commercial cruise ship – where lots of makeup and formal dresses were exactly what I needed in order to fit in. Another difference among the two contexts was that in prisons and jails I carried a yellow notepad most of the time.

The notepad marked me as an official person and was easy to handle when I was hanging out in the correctional officer's observation booths. On the cruise ship it was not feasible to carry around a notebook and take notes, so I was taking notes on scraps of paper and recorded observations in a journal, back in my cabin.

None of the preceding actions about my appearance and note-taking are things I could have predicted before experiencing the research scene. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to be comfortable with a certain amount of lack of control and to have some tolerance for ambiguity. Ethnographers take on the role of "learner." They listen, watch, and absorb meaning from the field and from the research participants.

Sensitizing concepts

Even though most qualitative researchers start broad, they also frequently begin with several concepts in mind about potential issues or theories that may become salient. Indeed, it is perfectly acceptable and quite helpful for qualitative researchers to read literature and to gather sensitizing concepts along the way. **Sensitizing concepts** are theories or interpretive devices that serve as jumping-off points or lenses for qualitative study (Charmaz, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These concepts – gleaned from past experience or research, or mentioned in former scholarship – serve as background ideas that offer frameworks through which researchers see, organize, and experience the research problem. Most researchers begin with an inventory of favorite concepts, theories, and personal interests to draw attention to certain features in the scene.

For instance, in a study of children on a playground, researchers may begin with concepts such as *bonding*, *conflict*, and *shyness*. By acknowledging these sensitizing concepts, they are more likely to be self-reflexive about the interests they bring to the project. A researcher may have a long-standing interest in how children bond as friends because he personally has vivid memories about his best friend in kindergarten. A different researcher may instead focus on shy children because of her theoretical expertise in social anxiety. Meanwhile, another researcher may be interested in conflict because he is working on a grant that is funding research on this topic.

Simply put, sensitizing concepts are issues to which the researcher is most attuned. They effectively help narrow and focus perception in research scenes that are complex, chaotic, and overflowing with multiple issues. Just like research questions, sensitizing concepts provide a guide on where to start, deepening perception and analysis along the way (Bowen, 2006). As time is spent in the scene, researchers can go back to the literature, learn more about certain theoretical concepts, and examine how they are playing out in the data.

Key definitions and territories of qualitative research

In order to enter *any* conversation – whether it's about sports, theater, food, or fashion – it is important to understand key categories, typologies, and classifications. The same is true in qualitative research. Definitions are different depending on whom you talk to, and some terms are fraught with political ramifications of who "owns" specific parts of academic territory. The following definitions are some of the most commonly used in qualitative research.

The phrase **qualitative methods** is an umbrella concept that covers interviews (group or one-on-one), participant observation (in person or online), and document analysis

(paper or electronic). Such methods can include research in the field, a focus-group room, an office, or a classroom. Qualitative methods by definition need not include long-term immersion into a culture or require a holistic examination of *all* social practices. Indeed, some qualitative studies cover the course of a single day (e.g. Trujillo, 1993) and others come in the form of open-ended qualitative survey approaches (Howard & Prividera, 2008). Furthermore, researchers can engage in qualitative methods over a long time period or for an extremely short duration. The definition of qualitative methods is purposefully broad and encompasses several more specific types of inquiry.

Naturalistic inquiry refers to the process of analyzing social action in uncontrived field settings in which the inquirer does not impose predetermined theories or manipulate the setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Naturalistic research is described as value-laden and, by definition, *always* takes place in the field, which may be an organization, a park, an airport, or a far-away culture – but it cannot be a focus-group room or laboratory (unless the topic of study is naturally occurring lab behavior). Some might argue that every setting is contrived and changed inasmuch as the researcher's presence influences it. However, the general notion of naturalistic inquiry is that the researcher travels to a regularly occurring context and examines participants as they regularly act.

Long-term immersion into a culture is a hallmark of **ethnography**, another key type of qualitative research. Ethnography combines two ancient Greek words: *ethnos*, which meant "tribe, nation, people," and *graphein*, "to write." As they write and describe people and cultures, ethnographers tend to live intimately beside and among other cultural members. Ethnographers focus on a wide range of cultural aspects, including language use, rituals, ceremonies, relationships, and artifacts. Some researchers frame their work slightly differently, by adopting the label **ethnographic methods** or approaches to specific contextual research needs (e.g. Ashcraft, 2007). Researchers who use ethnographic methods tend to engage in participant observation and field interviewing. In addition, they may augment field observation through archival research and interviews from a variety of different contexts. Further, they are more likely to focus their analyses on one or two particular concepts connected to their research questions rather than analyze an entire range of cultural issues. The phrase "ethnographic methods" provides a helpful way to describe one's methodological approach and to sidestep potential criticism from scholars who want to reserve the term *ethnography* for long-term, side-by-side, immersed, and holistic studies of a culture.

Another territory of qualitative research is **narrative inquiry**. Narrative researchers view stories – whether gathered through fieldnotes, interviews, oral tales, blogs, letters, or autobiographies – as fundamental to human experience (Clandinin, 2007). People reveal the ways they interpret their identities and experiences through their stories. Lawler notes:

> We all tell stories about our lives, both to ourselves and to others; and it is through such stories that we make sense of the world, of our relationship to that world, and of the relationship between ourselves and other selves. Further, it is through such stories that we produce identities. (Lawler, 2002, p. 239)

From this point of view, stories are not just after-the-fact representations or mirrors of reality. Rather, they serve to construct and shape experience. Even when people lie, exaggerate, and forget (Riessman, 1993), narrative provides a window for understanding how others interpret a certain situation and create a reality that they, in turn, act upon.

Stories are also common in another territory of qualitative research, called autoethnography. As noted in Chapter 1, **autoethnography** refers to the systematic study, analysis, and narrative description of one's own experiences, interactions, culture, and identity. Many autoethnographic texts are marked by vulnerability, emotion, and making the personal political (Holman Jones, 2005). Autoethnographers' methodology includes systematic introspection and emotional recall (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), often about painful or tragic experiences, and writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2000b). These practices can lead to evocative tales that encourage dialogue, change, and social justice. Fox (2007), for instance, suggests how his story of being a thin gay man (whom other people read as HIV positive) functions as a "narrative blueprint" for living – a "personal tale made public with the intent of inspiring identification among audience members seeking a narrative model to help guide future attitudes and behaviors" (p. 9). In other words, our auto-ethnographic stories – even when intensely personal – can provide sensemaking guides for others in similar spaces.

There is some controversy as to whether autoethnography should be conceptually divided into "analytical" and "evocative." Anderson (2006) explains that analytic autoethnography is characterized by complete membership, reflexivity, and narrative visibility of the self. However, he differentiates it as theoretically more committed and not requiring the considerable expressive representational skills of the more well-known "evocative" autoethnography. Despite any distinctions within autoethnography, most scholars agree that autoethnographic work is not and should not be about narcissistic naval gazing or personal catharsis (Krizek, 2003). Certainly, autoethnography honors a rigorous self-reflexivity and may end up being therapeutic both for the writer and for the reader. However, autoethnography also engages dialogue with others, connects to theoretical and scholarly concerns, and expresses stories about the self in ways that provide alternative ways to live and see the world.

Autoethnography also serves as a common venue for another territory of qualitative sensibilities, which may collectively be called **impressionist tales** (Van Maanen, 1988); these have variously been termed performance and messy texts (Denzin, 1997), creative analytic practice ethnography (Richardson, 2000b) and the new ethnography (Goodall, 2000). Qualitative research can be performative, messy, creative, and "new" whether authors analyze their own stories or the stories of others. Impressionist tales present ethnographic knowledge in the form of poems, scripts, short stories, layered accounts, and dramas. These texts are creative, personal, shaped from personal experience, and addressed to both academic and public audiences. They are often "messy" because they exist in an in-between, liminal space where rhetoric, performance, ethnography and cultural studies converge (Conquergood, 1992a). We will talk more about writing and representation in Chapters 12 and 13. However, it is important to be familiar with these types of qualitative practices from the beginning, as they are not only methods of representing or writing; they also provide valuable ways of approaching, inquiring, and knowing.

Finally another common phrase used to class a certain territory of qualitative research is grounded theory. **Grounded theory**, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and extended by Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998) and Charmaz (2006), refers to a systematic inductive analysis of data that is made from the ground up. Rather than approaching the data with pre-existing theories and concepts and applying these theories to the data (an etic approach), the researcher begins instead by collecting data, engaging in open line-by-line analysis, creating larger themes from these data, and linking them together in a larger story. This emic approach, in turn, produces grounded theory. We will turn to a more detailed discussion of grounded theory and grounded data analysis techniques in Chapter 9.

Historical matters

A quick historical tour about ethnography and research methods can shed light on the ongoing theoretical and methodological issues related to qualitative research. Furthermore, understanding our past can help shape our future, as we consider preferences for and biases against qualitative research, ethical concerns, and various political issues that continue to shape qualitative research today.

The early days

Clair (2003) provides an excellent history of ethnography and its checkered past. Ethnography draws its origins from investigations into foreign cultures. Although perhaps this was not the intention of some researchers, many early ethnographic investigations constituted a type of **colonialism** – the control and exploitation of a weaker or racially different culture by a stronger group.

Western Europeans such as Christopher Columbus went in search of new lands in the fifteenth century – not only to describe them, but also to make them their own. Conquerors viewed the native people as primitive and in need of their help in order to become civilized. Indeed colonialism is closely connected to **ethnocentrism**, the belief that one's own racial and ethnic values and ways of being are superior to those of other groups. Dark-skinned natives were oftentimes killed, abused, and enslaved. Colonialist annihilation was so complete in some cultures that a new wave of ethnography began in the 1800s as a means of saving cultures from extinction and of documenting exotic cultural legends, myths, history, language, and medicines. An ongoing ethical concern of ethnography is the extent to which one can fairly use another society's culture, stories, artifacts, and histories for the purpose of one's own entertainment, education, or advancement.

In the early 1900s, researchers such as W. E. B. DuBois – an African American scholar who studied Black culture in Philadelphia – began questioning colonization and linking it to racial prejudice. Ethnographers also found themselves in unique situations that were not of their planning. Such was the case with Austrian-born Bronislaw Malinowski, who traveled to Australia with a British contingent just as World War II began. Considered an enemy by Australian forces, Malinowski was exiled to the Trobiand Islands. He was allowed to conduct fieldwork in New Guinea during his incarceration, and he eventually decided to participate in Trobiand society. Malinowski, considered one of the most significant anthropologists of the twentieth century, did some of his most important work during this period, producing foundational theories about participant observation (Clair, 2003).

The two world wars of the 1900s encouraged researchers to examine cultures closer to home. George Orwell examined his own poverty, W. F. Whyte studied war's impact on organizations, and Antonio Gramsci wrote from his prison cell about power and politics. Scholars at the Chicago School of Sociology became known for applying ethnography to social problems such as drug abuse, poverty, crime and disease in urban settings (Abbott, 1999). In short, naturalistic research into, and the in-depth cultural examination of, local concerns became just as important as studying exotic people in distant lands.

Ethically problematic research and the creation of the IRB

World War II brought with it the **Nuremberg Code**, which uncovered and judged the atrocious and inhumane experimentation conducted by Nazi physicians on prisoners of war. The code included principles that are now required ethical guidelines for research, for instance

voluntary and informed consent, freedom from coercion, comprehension of the potential risks and benefits of the research, and a scientifically valid research design, which could produce results for the good of society. Similar recommendations were made by the World Medical Association in its *Declaration of Helsinki: Recommendations Guiding Medical Doctors in Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects* (World Medical Association, 1975). Despite these codes, ethically problematic social science research continued. Two famous social science studies were the Milgram experiment and the Stanford Prison experiment.

In the early 1960s, Stanley Milgram examined the willingness of ordinary people to deliver what they believed to be painful electric shocks to someone whom they thought to be another innocent participant (in reality they were giving fake shocks to an actor). The experiment was devised as a response to the Nazi war crimes and inquired into the likelihood that well-intentioned people could be coerced into hurting others (Milgram, 1974). When gently encouraged by the experimenter in a white lab coat, a surprisingly high percentage of everyday people were willing to proceed with administering what they thought to be increasingly higher voltage shocks. Although the shocks were not real, the experiment nonetheless created extreme stress in the participants and would not be allowed by today's research guidelines.

Another famous and ethically questionable study was the Stanford Prison experiment, conducted in 1971 and led by psychologist Philip Zimbardo (Zimbardo, Maslach, & Stanford University California Department of Psychology, 1973). In this experiment, 24 male undergraduates were paid the equivalent of $80 a day to "play" as guards and prisoners in the basement of a Stanford classroom building. The students quickly adapted to their roles and this rapidly led to a surprisingly abusive, sadistic, and dangerous environment, in which the prisoners were emotionally traumatized (see Figure 2.3). Two "prisoners" showed signs of a nervous breakdown and were released within a couple of days. Because of the unpredictable effects of the experiment and resulting ethical concerns, Zimbardo terminated the planned two-week experiment after only six days.

Ethnography's colonialist history, coupled with the atrocities of the Nazis and with questionable research practices such as those typified in the Milgram and Stanford Prison experiments, paved the road toward the creation of **human subject protections**. These measures, required by institutional review boards, are designed to protect people ("human subjects") from unethical research – a topic to be detailed in Chapter 5. Although most

qualitative researchers do not encounter the same ethical trappings of experimental studies, researchers using a variety of approaches are now faced with increasing institutional reviews of their work.

Recent history

As World War II came to a close, increasing numbers of ethnographers began studying places close to home. These included descriptions of labor–management relations (Roy, 1959) and descriptive accounts of daily work (Argyris, 1953). However, ethnographers were also sent far away, to study "third worlds." Such was the case of Geertz (1973), who was funded by the Ford Foundation in the 1970s to conduct research that would improve the economic growth of depressed cultures. Social science research began to take an "interpretive turn," with increasing focus on interaction and linguistics. Furthermore, a "crisis of ethnographic authority" (Erickson, 2011, p. 48) in which people began to question the credibility of reigning ethnographic texts led to more participatory, autoethnographic, and self-reflexive reports.

At about this time, a range of social science scholars began to take seriously qualitative methods and the cultural approach. Communication historian and theorist James Carey (1975) encouraged researchers to make "large claims from small matters" by studying "particular rituals in poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, stories, and myths" (p. 190). Interpretive and critical points of view stood in stark contrast to a more dominant tradition of factually based realist ethnography. While realist researchers studied poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, stories, and myths, they did so being informed by the notion of a scientific separation of the researcher from the data, whereas the new ethnographers increasingly denied that such a separation can, or should, exist.

In the 1980s and in conjunction with the rise of postmodern viewpoints, researchers began to seriously question the notion of one true reality and the very concept of representation. Anthropologists Clifford and Marcus (1986) claimed that ethnographic truths are "inherently *partial*" (p. 7). Organizational ethnographer Van Maanen (1988) suggested in his famous *Tales of the Field* that the most commonly accepted "realist tale," characterized by an all-knowing author, is just one out of several different ways to represent culture. He also described autoethnographic "confessional" tales, dramatic and creatively written "impressionistic" tales, literary tales, jointly told tales, and critical tales (all presented in more detail in Chapter 12).

Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982, 1983), pioneers in the study of organizations as cultures, drew from Geertz's interpretivism – studying organizations *not* as machines, but rather as tribes, and viewing familiar phenomena as strange, exotic, and full of special-ized meanings. The 1981 Alta Organizational Communication Conference encouraged researchers to move beyond the transmission model of communication and to examine instead how communication serves to construct or constitute relationships, cultures, and organizations (Kuhn, 2005). This "linguistic turn" not only signified a methodological shift away from studying communication as a measurable outcome, but also indicated a fundamental transformation in researchers' ways of building knowledge and of knowing the world (Deetz, 2003).

Current controversies

Today's period in qualitative inquiry celebrates more transparent displays of various research processes, reflexivity, and subjectivity. The increasing interest in qualitative research across many disciplines – together with the recognition that qualitative research

is rigorous and important – is evidenced by the exploding attendance rates at academic conferences such as the Congress for Qualitative Inquiry (http://www.icqi.org/) and the Qualitative Research in Management and Organizations (http://www.hull.ac.uk/hubs/qrm/), and at established ethnographic divisions in long-standing professional associations, such as the National Communication Association (http://natcom.org). Examples of qualitative work are increasingly common in top journals from a variety of social scientific disciplines: communication, education, sociology, management, health, gender, ethnic studies – and more. In short, increasing research engages interpretive issues of language, power, and discourse for the purpose of providing grounded, contextual insight.

Although qualitative research practices have been well disseminated and accepted within a number of academic disciplines, much of the scholarly community is still unfamiliar with methodologies that don't align with quantitative methods (Cannella & Lincoln, 2004). Some of the best known qualitative researchers believe that a methodological conservatism has crept upon social science since the early 2000s, as evidenced in an increasing preference for research that is experimental and quantitative (Denzin & Giardina, 2008).

Governmental policies such as the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and the 2002 National Research Council (NRC) report have had the consequence of suggesting that the only rigorous type of social science research is replicable and generalizable across settings (de Marrais, 2004). This has challenged qualitative researchers to communicate better about, and to earn greater respect for, our work in a new research landscape, which is marked by an attendant "politics of evidence" (Lather, 2004; Lincoln & Cannella, 2004). Such a landscape provides fewer rewards or incentives for conducting in-depth inquiry or for practicing methods associated with ethnographic, critical, postmodern, and feminist approaches.

For research diversity to survive in this environment, qualitative researchers must claim a space that avoids consenting to realist or quantitative research norms, yet recognizes the constraints of collisions among institutional review boards, an audit culture, and the politics of evidence (Cheek, 2007). Hence qualitative researchers must not only learn the practical tools of making sense of their data, but also be able to discuss their approach with power holders who decide what types of research count as significant and important.

In summary

This chapter has introduced and explained qualitative research principles at a basic level, comparing them with the principles of quantitative research, discussing the difference between inductive/emic and deductive/etic approaches, and highlighting the importance of studying both action and structure. Qualitative research can be understood through the metaphor of the funnel, considering research as gestalt and viewing the researcher as bricoleur. We have also discussed several main territories of qualitative research, including ethnography, naturalistic inquiry, narrative approaches, autoethnography, messy texts, and grounded theory.

I offered a brief history of ethnography and research to help provide the background needed to understand enduring ethical concerns and human subjects' controversies. This discussion also previews some of the paradigmatic tensions that still frame today's research and theoretical approaches. In the following chapter we delve in greater detail into research paradigms and the theoretical frameworks most common to qualitative research.

EXERCISE 2.2

Research problems and questions

Describe an issue that sparks your curiosity and that you plan to explore in your research site. This could be a social and/or a theoretical problem, or just an issue that confuses or fascinates you.

1 Phrase your approach in the form of one or more research questions (see Chapter 1 to refresh your memory on how to write these).
2 Describe why an emic qualitative study of this phenomenon is especially warranted and valuable given the research questions/problems.
3 Explain several sensitizing concepts from past experience or research that align with your research interests. How will these concepts help focus your research?
4 As a bricoleur, what different types of data could you piece together in order to answer your research questions?

KEY TERMS

→ **action**   contextual talk, texts, and interactions (e.g. documents, emails, verbal routines, text messages, and comments)

→ **autoethnography**   the systematic study, analysis, and narrative description of one's own experiences, interactions, culture, and identity

→ **bricolage**   the practice of making creative and resourceful use of a variety of pieces of data that happen to be available

→ **colonialism**   refers to the control and exploitation of a weaker or racially different culture by a stronger (usually Western European) culture

→ **deductive reasoning**   a "top-down" type of reasoning that begins with broad generalizations and theories and then moves to the observation of particular circumstances in order to confirm or falsify the theory

→ **emic**   a perspective in which behavior is described from the actor's point of view and is context-specific

→ **ethnocentrism**   the belief that one's own racial and ethnic values and way of being are more important than, or superior to, those of other groups

→ **ethnographic methods**   the use of participant observation and field interviews, but not necessarily accompanied by immersion in the field or by a holistic cultural analysis

→ **ethnography**   research marked by long-term immersion into a culture and by the thick description of a variety of cultural aspects including language use, rituals, ceremonies, relationships, and artifacts

etic a perspective in which behavior is described according to externally derived, non-culture-specific criteria

gestalt   a German word meaning literally "form" or "shape" and used in many European languages to refer to an integrated system or culture where the whole is more than a sum of its parts

grand narratives   powerful systems of stories suggesting that people or processes unfold in a particular way (e.g. the notion that aging equates with decline)

grounded theory   developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and extended by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006), grounded theory is a systematic inductive analysis of data (i.e. an analysis from the ground up, or a "bottom-up" analysis)

human subject protections   codes developed to protect people ("human subjects") from unethical research

impressionist tales   creative, personal tales that present ethnographic knowledge in the form of poems, scripts, short stories, layered accounts, and dramas

inductive reasoning   a "bottom-up" type of reasoning that begins with specific observations and particular circumstances and then moves on to broader generalizations and theories

narrative inquiry   research that views stories – whether gathered through field notes, interviews, oral tales, blogs, letters, or autobiographies – as fundamental to human experience

naturalistic inquiry   the analysis of social action in uncontrived field settings

Nuremberg Code   a research ethics code that arose in response to the Nazis' inhumane experimentation; the code includes clauses on voluntary and informed consent, freedom from coercion, comprehension of the potential risks and benefits of the research, and a scientifically valid research design

qualitative methods   an umbrella phrase that refers to the collection, analysis, and interpretation of interview, participant observation, and document data in order to understand and describe meanings, relationships, and patterns

quantitative methods   research methods that use measurement and statistics to transform empirical data into numbers and to develop mathematical models that quantify behavior

sensitizing concepts   interpretive devices that serve as jumping-off points or lenses for qualitative study

structure   enduring schools of knowledge, societal norms, and myths that shape and delimit action