Qualitative Methods in Social Research is an accessible and engaging introduction to qualitative research methods, cov[ering] a wide range of methods including ethnography, observa[tion], interviewing, content analysis, and unobtrusive measures. [The] author includes current research examples and abundant ex[er]cises to help students understand and apply various research techniques.

"This is a terrific text that fills a real need in my course. The author provides concrete strategies for doing research and includes a range of examples from different traditions of qualitative research. The exercises and questions at the end of each chapter really help to solidify the issues, and give students an interactive method of understanding how qualitative research is done."

—Amy L. Best, San Jose State University

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6

Unobtrusive Measures

Analyzing Texts and Material Artifacts

The average person throws away 2.1 pounds of garbage a day, much of it paper and plastic (Rathje and Murphy 1992). What would people find if they systematically rooted through your garbage? No doubt lots of paper, some food wrappings, some leftover food, and maybe some worn-out clothes or empty printer cartridges. How much evidence of fast-food consumption would they find? What about fresh vegetables, or milk, or soda? What might they be able to tell about your study habits? Your work habits? Your choices in recreation?

That's exactly what William Rathje, an archaeologist and director of the Garbage Project at the University of Arizona, does. Project researchers systematically identify and analyze what households in Tucson, Arizona, throw away. They also examine landfills, sometimes digging down deep to analyze trash from earlier decades. By systematically analyzing household garbage, they have learned a great deal about people's habits and behaviors—especially those that people don't necessarily want to talk about, like drinking alcohol or eating processed foods (Rathje 1992, 1993). They have even devised ways to estimate the size and composition of the population based on garbage. For example, they can fairly reliably tell how many babies live in a given neighborhood by the number of diapers they find in the trash.

The work of the Garbage Project is a good example of using *unobtrusive measures* to study human behavior. Unobtrusive measures involve any form of studying human behavior that does not rely on asking peoparticipant observation). These may include studying human physical traces, as the Garbage Project does, or analyzing written records and documents, the media (like television or radio), or the Internet.

PHYSICAL TRACES

One way in which you can study people without interacting directly is through the study of physical traces (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest, and Grove 1981). Humans leave physical traces of their various activities behind as they go about their daily lives, and you can use this evidence to make inferences about them. In my neighborhood, for example, you can buy a Chinese-language newspaper from a box on the street alongside the local English-language paper; you can also buy national newspapers in English, like *USA Today* and *The New York Times.* This fact tells us that there is a large enough population of Chinese-speaking people in the community to support a Chinese newspaper. In the same neighborhood, you can see many Italian groceries and bakeries alongside Vietnamese noodle shops. Again, this gives us some information about the neighborhood and the ethnic groups living there. A cemetery in a neighboring town shows a similar pattern. Most of the tombstones in the oldest part of the cemetery, dating from the late 1700s, contain English names. In a somewhat newer part of the cemetery, you can read Irish and Italian names on the gravestones. In the newest part of the cemetery are a few Asian, Armenian, and Portuguese names, along with large numbers of Italian and Irish names. A careful social observer can learn something about the migration patterns of ethnic groups by looking at the environment.

Generally, physical traces are either measures of accretion or measures of erosion. Measures of *accretion* entail the accumulation of layers. The Garbage Project is a good example of this. Garbage builds up in layers as people throw things out. By studying the layers, you can get information about how a society or group of people within it change over time. In the top layers, for example, you might see computer monitors and other parts of discarded personal computers in landfills. You certainly wouldn't find evidence of these if you dug down a little deeper; instead, you might find construction debris, bottles, and cans (as you would still find today). If you looked carefully, you might find pull-top tabs from beer and soda cans from the 1960s or eight-track tape players from the 1970s.

Another good example of accretion is graffiti (Lee 2000), which can include "official" signs and notices such as stop signs or no-parking signs. These signs, some argue, serve as a continual reminder of the state's regula-

tion of social life. Sometimes, graffiti can be more political in nature or express pressing social concerns. For example, stop signs have been spray-painted to read "Stop Rape" or "Stop War." Recently, concerns about globalization have also been expressed in the form of graffiti. Graffiti can also serve to demarcate social boundaries, as in gang graffiti. Public art, including murals, can also be considered a kind of graffiti. And all of these physical traces can be analyzed.

Measures of *erosion* entail studying how people gradually wear down facets of their environment through daily use. By studying patterns of wear, you can gain information about people's activities. For example, a landscape architect might place a walkway in an area where people don't habitually walk, but the paths worn in the lawn indicate where people *actually* walk. In a library, the most frequently used periodicals might be heavily thumbed and worn looking. In a museum, footprints might be worn into the floor of the most visited exhibits, whereas the floors near little-viewed sites might be clean and shiny.

Your imagination is the only limit in devising ways to study people's physical traces. In general, this evidence can help you figure out what people *actually* do, rather than what they say they do. Because this method does not entail interacting directly with people, it also enables greater anonymity for the researcher (Webb et al. 1981). In addition, the biases of this research method are likely to be very different from those of other methods, such as participant observation and interviewing. For this reason, studying physical traces can be a very useful addition to more traditional sociological methods.

But this method has drawbacks. Most important, we need to ask, What is the likelihood that any given object will actually survive? For example, vegetables decompose far more quickly than bones. Thus, unless you sift through garbage quickly, you will have more difficulty gaining evidence of vegetable eating than of meat eating. In addition, some physical accretion and erosion may be so small as to be unmeasurable. Walking on a soft surface, like a lawn, will yield more traces than walking on a hard surface, like concrete. You might not be able to measure the erosion of concrete in a short span of time. Finally, because these methods tend not be very systematic, they often are paired with other, more systematic methods.

MATERIAL ARTIFACTS

One form of studying physical traces is the study of *material artifacts,* the objects that people produce, like pots and pans and cars and computers. Archaeologists and historians may be more artifacts, but sociologists can use them as well to help make sense of the social world. Social scientists have studied tattoos (Sanders 1989), graffiti (Cole 1991), and Zippo cigarette lighters collected in Vietnam (Walters 1997), among many others.

Analyzing material artifacts can be far more complicated than analyzing written texts. First, material artifacts are less logical than formal language, in the sense that they don't have a formal grammar. You can't make a comprehensive dictionary of all the meanings that an artifact might possess. Furthermore, the meanings of material objects often remain implicit (Hodder 1998, p. 117). Thus, we need to understand the social contexts in which material artifacts are made, used, discarded, and reused (Hodder 1989, 1998). This means that the act of interpreting material culture has to be tentative. It expresses as much about the analyst—about who you are—as the material culture itself.

Second, the meanings of material artifacts may change over time, as may the contexts in which they are produced. When automobiles were first produced, for example, only the wealthy could afford them. Car ownership takes on very different meanings when most people can afford to own one.

Third, material artifacts are harder to "read" than a written text because they are not linear. In reading a set of field notes or a transcript of an interview or any other written document, you know to read from left to right and from top to bottom. (Of course, the conventions for reading vary from one language or culture to another. If you were reading a document in Japanese or Hebrew, you would move from right to left, from what feels to an English speaker like the back to the front.) With material artifacts, there is no necessary order to your analysis. Imagine that you are interested in contemporary fashion and want to understand the meanings of a pile of clothes. There is no necessary order in which you should "read" those clothes. From top to bottom? Left to right? Back to front? Analyzing material artifacts is not a linear process.

In addition, in analyzing material artifacts, you have to figure out what things mean without having access to the person (or people) who produced them or used them. This is especially true if you are working with historical artifacts. Thus, you may not have an "insider's" perspective on the meanings of things and have to interpret them using contextual clues. Even if you do have an insider's perspective, people are often not articulate about why they do things. Think about it: Why is an exam book usually blue, and why do we still call it a "blue book" even if it is not blue? Why do we usually use a mug for hot drinks like coffee or tea, and a cup or glass for cold drinks? Why not use the same container for both? Having the advice of an insider—one who uses blue books or coffee mugs or glasses—probably won't help you much.

Interpreting material artifacts thus involves a *hermeneutical* process, a process of making meaning. You need to try to situate the artifact both in the context in which it was made and produced and in the context in which you (as analyst) are situated. You need to try to understand not only how the item was produced but also how it came to your attention for analysis. Why was this particular artifact (or type of artifact) preserved, and not others? At one level, this is a physical process. Some kinds of things (like vegetable matter) decompose relatively quickly; others (like ceramic or bone or stone) do not. Yet the preservation of things is also a social process, one that involves human choices about what should be preserved and what should not. What things are seen as *worth* keeping? For example, you probably don't think twice about throwing out or recycling a Coke can or a bottle that water came in. In another culture, in which material goods are less plentiful, these items would be carefully preserved and reused for a different purpose.

How do you go about analyzing material artifacts? It is certainly not easy, nor are there any general guidelines. Analyzing these artifacts always involves the study of local, particular cultures. One analyst states, "There is nothing easy in our work, but its basic strategy is not hard to state. We hunt for patterns" (Glassie 1991, p. 255). Archaeologist Ian Hodder suggests that the analyst of material artifacts must work "between past and present or between different examples of material culture, making analogies between them" (1998, p. 121). To do this, you need to immerse yourself in the specific historical context (Tuchman 1998), and you need to know enough about the cultural context in which something has meaning. Specifically, you need to address these issues:

- Where and when was this item (or group of items) produced?
- What do you know about the society in which it was produced?
- What kinds of people made the object you are analyzing? How? Who used it?
- How was it sold or distributed?
- Did different people use the object in different kinds of ways? How?
- How was the meaning of the object transformed in different contexts?
- What kinds of personal meanings might the objects have had, as well as larger social meanings?
- What kinds of things were used in similar ways?
- What are the economic and political systems in which the items

These are just some of the questions you might ask to get you started.

You also need to consider what historical theories might help you understand the material artifacts you are trying to analyze (Hodder 1998). How have different theorists thought about the time period or the type of material culture you are interested in analyzing? It's important to immerse yourself in what others have said about the historical period (whether it is an earlier period or today) and the social context.

Finally, you should try to confirm the account you have made. That is, you should ensure that your account is internally coherent, logical, and plausible. You also need to consider any potential alternative arguments. And you need to ask whether your account leads you to understand similar objects and opens up new lines of questioning.

Ian Walters' research into Zippo cigarette lighters provides a good example of the analysis of material culture (1997). Zippo lighters were issued to American and Australian military personnel during the Vietnam War (or, as the Vietnamese call it, the American War in Vietnam). Many service personnel engraved the lighters with their date of tour, location of service, or the year. Others engraved them with short sayings or quips. Many thousands of these lighters survived. Today, there is a thriving market in Zippo lighters in Vietnam's tourist markets, and people buy them as war memorabilia. Interestingly, most of the lighters available in Vietnam are fakes—not the actual Zippo lighters from the war era. Yet the sayings engraved on them replicate the engravings of the service personnel.

Thus, these lighters have retained meanings far broader than their simple function: to light cigarettes. These lighters can be interpreted in multiple lights. As Walters argues, "As personalized icons, signifiers, they still speak to us long after their original owners have ceased to be fighters in the war zone" (1997, p. 64). In fact, the "life history" of the Zippo, Walters suggests, contains several stages. The lighter began life as a commodity—something to be bought or sold. It was sold to the army, issued or sold to individual soldiers, and used as a lighter (and as a war weapon). With the engraving, the lighter became a sign of unit identity or a personal statement. When it passed out of the owner's possession, it became either junk or someone else's souvenir (or perhaps someone's functioning cigarette lighter). In contemporary Vietnam, it reentered the commodity market as something else to be bought and sold. But it also became a memento (perhaps for soldiers who had served in the war and who returned decades later to buy the souvenir, or perhaps for other tourists), a museum piece (for those Zippos shown to be "actual" war-era items rather than fakes), an item for research, and even an object for discussion in a research methods textbook.

Walters argues, "Vietnam Zippos tell us stories. They become speech, for they mean something. Vietnam Zippos give us insights into the soldiers who annotated them and used them, loved them, laughed at them, and lost them" (Walters 1997, p. 73). But the lighters also tell stories about modern Vietnam and the world economy. To understand the meanings of the Zippo lighter, we need to immerse ourselves in the context of both the American War in Vietnam and contemporary Vietnamese life.

Analyzing material artifacts is clearly difficult—especially for those of us who are used to working with written texts. Because the analysis is so contextual, there are no simple rules that you can apply. You need to learn about the culture and history of the objects you want to analyze. But it is very worthwhile work, for it can lead you to understand human behavior in greater depth than can studying words alone.

DOCUMENTS AND RECORDS

Another way you can study human behavior unobtrusively is through written texts in the form of documents and records. *Documents* and *records* are any written materials that people leave behind. These might include things like private letters and diaries, corporate records, and government documents. These might also include media accounts, such as television programs, newspapers, and magazines. In more recent years, they might also include electronic texts, such as e-mail lists and Web sites. Although the different kinds of texts might involve somewhat different technologies, we can study them using similar methods. This chapter focuses especially on methods for obtaining written documents and records and on some of the associated problems in doing so. Chapter 8 examines methods for analyzing texts and making sense of documents and records. (The procedures for analyzing texts are typically called *content analysis.*)

Public Records

Many researchers distinguish between two kinds of written texts: documents and public records (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Macdonald and Tipton 1993). *Public records* include those materials produced for "official purposes" by social institutions like governments, schools, and hospitals. They document official transactions, like births or marriages or sales of houses. While many public records are numeric (a good example of this is U.S. Census Bureau materials) and are often used by economists and other quantitative social scientists, many others are text-based, including things like court transcripts and congressional debates.

For example, Linda Gordon (1988) used welfare records to try to understand family violence. As a historian, she was interested in how social conceptions of family violence had changed over time. She used case records from social work agencies to investigate this trend. Using these records from social welfare agencies, Gordon was able to document family violence among poor women, who typically did not leave private letters or diaries or other materials that would give insight into their experiences of violence. Without them, she probably would not have been able to document their experiences at all. But because she relied on social work records, she had only the perspective of the welfare workers who managed their cases. She lacked direct access to the women's own thoughts and feelings.

The federal government is one of the largest sources of official documents. But state, county, and city governments also generate records that can be used in qualitative analysis. Many of these documents are a matter of public record. And with the growth of the Internet, many records are now available on-line. You might want to explore, for example, Census Bureau materials (www.census.gov) or a general jumping-off point for federal government resources (www.info.gov). Remember, though, that Internet addresses tend to change rapidly. You may want to check with your librarian for other suggestions. Many libraries will bookmark helpful sites for searching government documents and other public records.

You might also want to examine public records in combination with participant observation. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) argue that archival data (which they define as records originally collected for bureaucratic purposes but used for research purposes) can be a very useful source of demographic information. Records such as voting lists, municipal listings of births and deaths or marriages, real estate transactions, and area maps can help field workers gain insight into the community they are studying. They argue that field workers should always attempt to gain access to these kinds of data to help describe the population and the way it has changed over time, as well as features of the physical environment.

Documents and Private Papers

Documents and private papers include things like letters, diaries, and personal papers. These may be personal in nature, such as the kinds of papers an individual gathers and generates over a lifetime—credit information, pay stubs, letters and other correspondence, news clippings, fliers, photographs, diaries, and so forth. Organizations, too, generate papers, including office memos, mission statements, and correspondence. While these kinds of private papers may be more difficult to obtain and interpret than publicly available government documents, they can provide invaluable insight into individuals' lives. Diaries and letters, for example, can provide important information about what individuals think and feel and about the texture of daily life. Financial records give clues about the economy and people's standard of living. Organizational records may give clues about how organizations function.

Personal papers and documents are sometimes seen as the province of historians. Still, sociologists have put them to good use as well. For example, Theresa Montini (1996) collected a variety of archival materials in her research on breast cancer informed-consent laws. In addition to transcripts of testimony at legislative hearings, copies of breast cancer informed-consent laws, and editorials and letters to the editor of medical journals, she collected documents from activists and former breast cancer patients, including letters, videotapes, and other personal papers. She combined her documentary research with participant observation and interviews.

Sociologist Nancy Whittier (1995) also drew on archival materials in her study of women's movement organizations in Columbus, Ohio. Along with in-depth interviews with activists, she analyzed the papers of a feminist organization, the personal files and correspondence of activists, and media reports of women's movement activity.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Most social researchers who do documentary analysis distinguish between primary sources and secondary sources. *Primary sources* are the original sources, like letters or eyewitness accounts of an event. *Secondary sources* are one step removed from primary sources (hence the name) and include things like historians' or sociologists' analyses, as well as the accounts of people who were not eyewitnesses and are not scholars. As Shulamit Reinharz puts it, primary sources are the "'raw' materials of history" while secondary sources are the "'cooked' analyses of those materials" (1992, p. 155).

The distinction between primary and secondary sources can be a little tricky. Historians will usually include things like magazines and newspapers as secondary sources, because they rely on the accounts of journalists and writers. But social scientists will sometimes use those sources as the primary source of data, as when a researcher studies the representation of domestic violence in women's magazines (Berns 1999).

Media Accounts

Media accounts include things like newspapers, magazines, books, films, and television programs. Qualitative social researchers have long used media accounts to investigate social life. These accounts are useful for understanding how groups of people are represented in public discourse or what norms and ideals for behavior exist in a particular time and place. They can tell us about changes (or stability) in social mores. Using media accounts, researchers have studied such varied topics as race and sex stereotyping in children's books (Clark, Lennon, and Morris 1993), gender in advertisements (Barthel 1988, Goffman 1976), fear of crime in the news (Altheide and Michalowski 1999), portrayals of animals in television advertisements (Lerner and Kalof 1999), and sexual nonconformity in television talk shows (Gamson 1998).

A strength of media accounts is that they are easily accessible and often cheap or free. Many media sources have existed for a long period of time—often decades, as in the case of major newspapers and mass market magazines. This makes them especially useful for looking at changes over time. Their easy accessibility can be a boon to beginning researchers (especially for projects like senior theses). One of my students, for example, compared how girls and women were portrayed in *Sports Illustrated* and *Sports Illustrated for Kids* (Elsinger 1998). She found that women and girls were much more frequently featured (and more likely to be shown as athletes rather than spectators) in the children's version of the magazine.

With media accounts—as with all written documents—you need to be careful about sources of bias. First, factual errors might creep into media accounts. For example, a newspaper might make a mistake about people's age, the spelling of names, or places (Macdonald and Tipton 1993). Although newspapers often print retractions, the original version of the story tends to stand. (Who reads retraction notices, after all?) More important, you always need to consider who published a particular account, for what purpose, and for what intended audience. A media source might be biased in a particular direction; for example, an editor might have a conservative or liberal slant and publish news that fits with his or her preconceived biases. You also need to consider the audience for whom the account is published. *The New York Times*, for example, is written for a wholly different audience than the *National Enquirer.*

Some suggest that analyses of texts—like TV shows, magazines, or newspapers—should be combined with studies of the producers and the audiences. Thus, Joshua Gamson combined interviews with TV talk show producers, interviews with show guests, participant observation at tapings, and analysis of transcripts of the shows (1998). The combination of methods made his research, published in a book called *Freaks Talk Back*, far richer and subtler than it would have been otherwise.

ELECTRONIC TEXTS

As the Internet and electronic texts have become more widely available, social researchers have begun to rely on them as sources of data as well. For example, researchers use the Internet to recruit research participants for both electronic interviews and more standard phone or face-to-face interviews. Documents posted on the Internet on listservs and electronic bulletin boards may be treated in ways similar to other documents and material artifacts. The Internet is also a site for participant observation. A researcher need not even be physically copresent to conduct participatory research in interactive sites (Kendall 2000).

For example, Joan Fleitas (1998) conducted research with children who had chronic illness or disabilities. She recruited participants via a Web site that she created specifically for her project, medical listservs, and listservs for parents of children with disabilities, as well as through more traditional techniques (including snowball sampling). Although she also conducted face-to-face focus groups, she collected most of her data through e-mail and on-line focus groups convened in chat groups established specifically for that purpose.

In a very different way, Lori Kendall conducted participant observation in an on-line format known as a *MUD* (multiuser dungeon) (Kendall 2000). A MUD is much like an on-line chat room. Instead of storing messages that were posted at an earlier time (as in an electronic message board or an e-mail listserv), a MUD involves real-time conversation, albeit in written form. Kendall was interested in how participants created raced and gendered identities on-line. She participated in the on-line chats, interviewed some of the participants, and read other on-line materials related to the MUD.

In another example of Internet-based research, Emily Noelle Ignacio (2000) examined messages posted on a newsgroup to understand how Filipina women created and negotiated identities in a newsgroup dedicated to Filipino culture and issues. Among other things, Ignacio was interested in seeing how the women might challenge stereotyped thinking about Filipinas.

As a research tool, the Internet has both strengths and weaknesses. One advantage is that the Internet can encourage open expression of thoughts and feelings because it does not involve face-to-face communication. In Fleitas's research, for example, children with physical disabilities were able to communicate without worrying about how their bodies would be perceived. In addition, because the Internet is global, researchers can recruit participants from a much larger geographical area than they might otherwise (Binik, Mah, and Kiesler 1999; Fleitas 1998).

However, not everybody has access to computers and the Internet. Internet users tend to be younger, wealthier, more technologically savvy, and better educated than nonusers. Males are more likely than females to be Internet users, as are individuals in wealthier nations with a better-developed infrastructure (Binik, Mah, and Kiesler 1999). Thus, research conducted with participants drawn from the Internet is likely to involve a more privileged sector of the population. Kendall (2000) found, for example, that most of her research participants were young, white, and male, with a few women and a few Asian Americans.

In addition, in conducting research on-line, researchers cannot pick up on nonverbal cues. Although people can insert graphics and pictures into text files to allow for both visual and text-based responses, researchers do not have access to the full range of nonverbal cues, such as shrugs and winks and yawns. Internet users sometimes attempt to re-create many of these nonverbal cues, with symbols like :) to indicate a smile or ;) to indicate a wink. Still, much is missed. Indeed, researchers typically can't even verify who the research participants are. For example, Fleitas (1998) couldn't verify that the e-mails actually were sent by disabled children. Because individuals may be more anonymous on the Internet, they may be more inclined to "play" with identities, presenting themselves as holding different genders, races/ethnicities, or other identities than they may in fact possess.

Researchers also use the Web for more traditional content analyses—for example, of electronic bulletin boards, Web sites, or e-mail listservs. Using the Internet in this way poses particular challenges. For example, Nalini Kotamraju (1999) suggests that, because the Internet has developed so recently and changes so rapidly, it is subject to "time compression." Change on the Internet comes about far more rapidly than in other spheres of life. This causes problems for researchers. Archival data may disappear as newer technologies and newer sites update "old" ones. Kotamraju argues, for example, that a researcher can't even find out what kind of jobs were available on-line a mere 3 months ago. Thus, sociologists who wish to use the Internet for research purposes must adapt the strategies historians have developed for dealing with the issue of time. For example, unlike sociologists, historians tend to expect that much of their data may be missing or

BOX 6.1 Some Useful Web Sites

General Sociology Research Sites

www.socsciresearch.com
www.sociolog.com
www.wcsu.ctstateu.edu/socialsci/socres.html

Government Sites

www.info.gov (a general jumping-off site for government agencies)
www.census.gov (U.S. Bureau of the Census)
www.cdc.gov (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
www.ed.gov (Department of Education)
www.fbi.gov (Federal Bureau of Investigation)

Qualitative Research Methods

www.ualberta.ca/~jrnorris/qual.html (QualPage: Resources for Qualitative Research)
www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/web.html

Associations

www.asanet.org (American Sociological Association)
www.latrobe.edu.au/www/aqr/index.html (Association for Qualitative Research)
www.coe.uga.edu/quig (Qualitative Interest Group)

impossible to find. They have thus developed strategies for gathering diverse forms of evidence.

At the same time, others argue that the Internet provides a wealth of materials for historians and other researchers (Donnelly and Ross 1997). In an article published in the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television,* Donnelly and Ross provide a number of sources that researchers interested in the history of the media might access, including the Media History Project (www.mediahistory.com), Vanderbilt University's Television Archives (http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu), and the University of Maryland's Broadcast Pioneers Library (www.itd.umd.edu). Box 6.1 lists some other sites that may provide useful starting points for research on the Internet.

The Internet can be a wonderful source for research projects, with literally hundreds of potentially useful Web sites. However, the Internet can also lead you astray. You need to assess whether the information on any given site is valid or whether the site simply wants to sell you something or express someone's personal feelings. Certainly, you might sometimes want to analyze how individuals express their feelings on a personal Web site. But you shouldn't mistake that subjective impression for anything else. You thus need to evaluate Web sites very carefully when relying on them in your research. You may find the guidelines set forth in Chapter 2 useful in evaluating potential sites for research.

Using the Internet for research also raises some novel ethical issues, with privacy and confidentiality issues paramount (Binik, Mah, and Kiesler 1999). For example, what parts of the Internet might reasonably be considered private? Is an on-line chat room public or private? What about a moderated e-mail list? An unmoderated one, which anyone can join? When do you need to gain informed consent? When simply viewing Web sites? When participating in an on-line chat or e-mail list? Whom should you ask permission from? In an e-mail listserv that changes membership frequently, how often do you need to remind participants that you are researching them? Ignacio (2000) notes, for example, that she posted a letter on the newsgroup she was studying every few weeks to inform participants. Not all newsgroups and e-mail lists allow researchers, however. Many moderated e-mail lists specifically request that participants not circulate or use the e-mail for any purpose other than personal use.

The nature of Internet participation also causes problems with consent issues. It's difficult to verify that the person giving consent is actually able to do so or that he or she is actually an adult. What kinds of assurances of confidentiality and anonymity can researchers reasonably give to their research participants? For example, while research participants might believe that their e-mail responses will be held in confidentiality, someone else (through either legitimate means or illegitimate ones) may gain access to information sent on-line. How can researchers minimize the chances that their participants' privacy will not be breached? This is especially an issue with sexuality research or research on other sensitive topics (Binik, Mah, and Kiesler 1999).

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

What is history? Sociologist Gaye Tuchman (1998) invites us to consider that question, arguing that history is more than merely a series of easily memorized dates and facts. In trying to incorporate historical perspectives in

our research, we need to ask what it means to live in a particular time period. We need to identify what assumptions we can make about how people live, what are the meanings of things in particular times and places, and how the past impinges on the present.

In many respects, historical analysis is very much like the analysis of material artifacts and documents. Historical research involves the analysis of secondary and, especially, primary sources. Sociological researchers may do so as well, but they also tend to rely on the work of historians (and secondary sources created by them) because historians tend to have much better access to and training in the use of archival materials. In addition, sociologists tend to ask somewhat different kinds of questions, often less specific or more theoretical ones.

In general, we may want to use historical methods to understand "big picture" types of questions. How did major social changes take place? When? Why are social arrangements different in various places and times? We might want to know, for example, how the women's movement emerged in various times and places. How is it different in, say, the United States and Mexico? To answer this question, we would need to know a little bit about the histories of both countries. It isn't enough merely to understand the present moment; we need to know how the movement developed over time.

Doing Historical-Comparative Research

Some researchers do what they call *historical-comparative research*—research that focuses either on one or more cases over time (the historical part) or on more than one nation or society at one point in time (the comparative part). Comparative researchers tend to compare a relatively small number of cases (Ragin 1994). They want to understand the cases in depth, as well as compare their similarities and differences.

One example of historical-comparative research is Nader Sohrabi's study of revolutions (1995). Sohrabi compared the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906, and the Russian Revolution of 1905 to try to understand their similarities and differences. Another example of historical-comparative research is Marshall Ganz's study of farm workers' organizations (2000). Specifically, Ganz was interested in why one organization, the United Farm Workers (UFW), succeeded while another one, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee of the AFL-CIO (AWOC), failed during the period 1959–1966. He focused on how differences in leadership, organizational influences, and creative strategies affected movement success.

In both of these examples, the researchers systematically compared the cases across a variety of dimensions. They used a variety of primary and secondary materials in their research, including newspaper articles, copies of legislation, published memoirs, proceedings of meetings, and historians' accounts.

In beginning to do comparative research, you first need to distinguish the cases by asking what these are cases *of*. Cases should be, in some sense, members of the same class or category. It wouldn't make much sense, for example, to compare the city of Boston with the nation-states of Honduras or India. But it might make sense to compare social movements in different nations—for example, the labor movement in Sweden, the United States, and Poland. Then, you need to consider the important facets of the cases you might compare. For example, are you interested in characteristics of the leadership? Political strategies? You might want to compare state support for the labor movement. Is it high in one place and low in another? As with all historical research, the knowledge of what to compare will only come from an in-depth understanding of the particulars of the cases and the theories advanced to explain them.

Gaining Access to Historical Materials

How do sociologists gain access to these kinds of materials? Where might social researchers find the kinds of archival materials that historical researchers use? Gaye Tuchman (1998) offers some useful advice to beginning qualitative historical researchers. You should begin by reading the secondary literature—what other historians and social scientists have said about the topic. This helps you to conceptualize your study and figure out what the main controversies are. Chapter 2 gave you some suggestions for conducting secondary research. You should follow those leads before turning to the primary sources.

Locating primary sources is much more difficult. As Tuchman (1998) argues, locating good primary sources requires a great deal of detective work. It is, essentially, specialized labor. In finding appropriate primary sources, you will need to figure out what kinds of archives may hold particular types of materials. For example, Cornell University's archives are a marvelous source for historical information on sexuality. The Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York are an extraordinarily rich source of primary material on lesbian life. Those who are doing research in the field you are interested in usually know of potential sources, as do good reference librarians. You would be well advised to begin there. You can also search the holdings of many libraries online. If you are restricted in your ability to travel, you may be able to find good archival material close to home. Often, primary source material is available on CD-ROM (sometimes for a fee) or over the Internet.

Evaluating Sources

One of the main challenges in using historical materials is evaluating them. Perhaps more than any other type of data, you need to evaluate historical materials carefully. When you are using secondary sources, you need to be alert to historians' implicit theories and paradigms. History is never simply a recitation of "just the facts." Rather, historians decide what to report, what details to emphasize, and how to interpret events. In the course of their research, historians typically gather thousands of pages of documents. Obviously, they don't simply print these documents verbatim and let the reader decide for her- or himself what they mean. Rather, they compress the huge volume of pages into a more manageable form. How do historians accomplish this? How do they decide what to focus on and what to ignore? They don't usually specify this process in their published works. As a careful reader, you need to try to figure out what the biases and predilections of the historian are. You also need to figure out if the author's viewpoint is well established. Do other historians say similar things? What kinds of evidence do they use? Does their evidence seem credible?

Primary sources require extra care. You need to determine first if the source is *authentic*. That is, was it actually written by the person said to have written it? When was it written? Where? Again, is the document authentic, or merely a clever fake?

You also need to determine if the primary source is *representative*. As we discussed in the section on material artifacts, not all documents survive. In evaluating primary source documents, it's important to consider which people are more likely to have left primary source documents behind. Literate people, for example, obviously are more likely to leave diaries and correspondence than those who cannot write or read. Thus, because African American slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write, they left few letters and other written materials that would document their daily lives. Much of what we know about African American life during slavery comes from oral histories and the testimonies of former slaves collected after the Civil War.

In general, ordinary people tend not to think that their lives are particularly interesting or worth documenting. Ordinary working-class people don't usually donate their private papers to archives or otherwise make their papers accessible to historical researchers. For example, have *you* donated your papers and personal effects to an archive? This fact leads to an inevitable bias in the kinds of personal materials available. Because people such as presidents or famous actors tend to assume that their lives are worth documenting, they are much more likely to preserve their papers. Yet most of us don't live like presidents or movie stars. The kinds of historical materials available tend to make it easier to gain knowledge of famous people's lives than ordinary people's.

In evaluating primary source materials, you need to ask whose perspective they reflect and what kinds of interests the writer had. For example, was the author of a slavery-era document a slaveholder? Someone active in the movement for the abolition of slavery? Each position carries with it a perspective and set of vested interests. A slaveholder who emphasized the good living conditions of slaves would probably not be believable. But if an abolitionist remarked on the quality of slave housing in a particular location, that person might be more credible. Historical records often reflect the interests of those in power. Thus, you need to evaluate materials carefully for bias.

You also need to consider how the document was preserved and how it made its way to an archive (or to your hands through some other means). Do you have access to the whole document, or only a fragment? What didn't survive? Did anyone have an interest in suppressing certain parts of the material? For example, the niece of poet Emily Dickinson censored passionate letters that Dickinson wrote to her sister-in-law, Sue Miller (Miller 1995). Censorship like this has made the study of lesbian and gay history (and, in general, the historical study of sexuality) difficult.

But not all gaps (or "missing data") result from censorship. Sometimes, materials are simply lost or discarded. Other times, despite people's best efforts to save them, materials may be destroyed. This means that historical researchers are inevitably working with fragmentary evidence. Because the "complete" record never survives, the conclusions you make based on such evidence must also be tentative.

Creating Meaning

When evaluating historical materials, you also should pay careful attention to meanings, at both a literal (or surface) level and a deeper one. At the surface level, you need to ask what the document means and what language was used. Sometimes, words change from one period to the next, so you need to be certain that you can understand the literal meaning.

At a deeper level, you need to know something about the conditions under which the document was produced. Again, this involves knowledge of the specific context and time period. Thus, you need to determine what kind of language was common for the time and place and person who created the document. And you need to determine whether other documents support the perspective or whether the document seems to be at odds with what others tend to say.

Doing historical and documentary research can be hard work. Perhaps more than any other type of research, it demands knowledge of the particular, local contexts in which various materials (written and otherwise) are produced, consumed, kept, and discarded. It demands a critical eye and an ability to scrutinize sources carefully. Yet, because of their very specificity, historical methods can provide a richer and more finely nuanced study than many other methods.

QUESTION FOR THOUGHT

What are some of the differences involved in analyzing material artifacts and written documents? What different kinds of information might they give you? Which would you prefer to study? Why?

EXERCISES

1. Look around your own neighborhood. What physical traces might help you figure out what kinds of people live there? (If you're having trouble getting started, try checking cemeteries, names on mailboxes, types of stores and restaurants, and so forth.)
2. How might you study the following things without either interviewing or directly observing people?
   a. Which toys are most popular among children
   b. Whether college students in a particular school exercise frequently
   c. Whether people in a particular neighborhood eat healthy foods
3. Locate some material artifacts that you can analyze. (If you're having trouble thinking of something, remember that material culture is all around you. It can be, literally, just about anything.) The items can be contemporary or historical. Try to find out as much as you can about how the things were produced and for whom. See if you can find out some of the meanings these items may have.
4. Choose a magazine that interests you. Try to step back and look at the magazine as a social analyst, not as a consumer. Then see what you can determine about the audience for the magazine. What does the magazine seem to assume are the interests and preoccupations of its readers?

What can you tell about the biases and interests of those who publish the magazine? (Alternatively, try this exercise using a newspaper, a TV show, or a radio program. If you are choosing a TV show or radio program, you will probably need to watch/listen a number of times.)

5. Investigate what historical materials are available, either in your school library, in a public library near you, in a local historical society, or on the Internet.
6. Choose a Web site of interest to you, and analyze its potential uses for research, using the guidelines for evaluating Web sites in Chapter 2.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Hodder, Ian. "The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture." In Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.

Lee, Raymond M. *Unobtrusive Methods in Social Research.* Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 2000.

Neuman, W. Lawrence. *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches,* 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1994. Devotes a full chapter (16) to historical-comparative research.

Ragin, Charles C. *Constructing Social Research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994. Gives more on comparative research.

Tuchman, Gaye. "Historical Social Science: Methodologies, Methods, and Meanings." In Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998.

Walters, Ian. "Vietnam Zippos." *Journal of Material Culture* 2(1): 61–75. 1997. A good example of analysis of material culture.

Webb, Eugene T.; Donald T. Campbell; Richard D. Swartz; and Lee Sechrest. *Unobtrusive Measures.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999.

7

Action Research

Organizing is the active unearthing of people's individual stories, the collective examination of the meaning of those stories in light of our shared story, and the opportunity to write new endings to both our individual and collective stories.

—LARRY MCNEIL (1995)

Who can conduct research? Can only people with Ph.D.'s or other specialists conduct research? Or can ordinary people do it themselves? What should be the relationship between the researcher and those being researched? And what is the purpose of research? To enlighten? To entertain? To create "basic" knowledge that has no particular application (at least not yet)? Or should research end with some form of action or improvement in the lives of people?

THE PURPOSE OF ACTION RESEARCH

Action researchers argue that research should not be aimed solely at creating esoteric knowledge, nor should it be conducted only by people with advanced degrees. The outcome of research should be *useful,* aimed at improving the lives of those who are the subject of research. Research, says Ernest Stringer, should be "organized and conducted in ways that are conducive to the formation of community—the 'common unity' of all participants—and that strengthen the democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualities of social life" (1996, p. 25). Because individuals are the experts on their own lives, action research should involve community