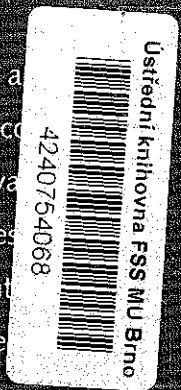


Qualitative Methods in Social Research is an accessible and engaging introduction to qualitative research methods, covering a wide range of methods including ethnography, observation, interviewing, content analysis, and unobtrusive measures. The author includes current research examples and abundant exercises 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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Qualitative Methods in Social Research

Kristin G. Esterberg

I

What Is Social Research?

Some Practical and Theoretical Concerns

WHAT IS SOCIAL RESEARCH?

What is social research? How does it differ from, say, journalism, or philosophy, or fiction, or any other way of knowing about the world? How does qualitative research, which this textbook focuses on, differ from quantitative research? What do social researchers do?

Sociologists answer these questions in many ways. These answers often reflect deep philosophical differences about the nature of social reality and the ways in which one should study it. Sociologists who prefer quantitative methodologies tend to argue that, unless researchers use something called "*the*" scientific method and follow the same kinds of rules that natural scientists (such as chemists) use, it isn't really social science research. Other sociologists believe that social science research is fundamentally different from the natural sciences. They argue that social research is primarily a matter of interpretation. In their eyes, the most important goal of social research is to investigate and illuminate how humans construct social reality.

I argue in this book that there are many different ways to do social research, with many different aims. What all these methods share is the goal of learning something about the social world, however that world is construed. While social scientists may disagree, sometimes heatedly, about the nature of social reality and the best ways to study it, they all agree on the importance of understanding the social world. Although I was trained in a quantitative tradition, modeled after the natural sciences, I have come to

adopt an interpretive approach in my own research and writing. Yet I continue to appreciate the diversity of approaches that social scientists take in their work. In this text, I hope you will learn to make your own judgments about the social world and the best methods for studying it.

This text focuses on qualitative methods for social research. Although some have argued that the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods is an artificial one (Jayaratne and Stewart 1991), there are some important differences. Most obviously, *quantitative research* involves enumerating things—that is, using numbers to describe relatively large groups of people. (This doesn't mean that qualitative researchers never count or use numbers; rather, it means that quantifying is not their main strategy.) Quantitative researchers might be interested, for example, in studying the effects of race and gender on people's earnings or the statistically significant differences between men's and women's earnings. But if there are only a small number of cases, quantitative research is of little use. Quantitative research is not particularly useful in revealing the meanings people ascribe to particular events or activities; nor is it well suited to understanding complicated social processes in context.

In contrast, *qualitative research* involves the scrutiny of social phenomena (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, pp. 11–14). Sociologists Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein argue that qualitative researchers look beyond ordinary, everyday ways of seeing social life and try to understand it in novel ways. Take, for example, the simple social act of talking on the telephone. When you answer the phone, chances are you don't think about the social rules for telephone talking. You merely pick up the phone and say, "Hello." You probably don't think about how you'll know who is on the other end; you simply expect the person to tell you. You might be frustrated if someone you don't know very well says, "It's me," and expects you to guess. A qualitative researcher might be interested in exploring this phenomenon further. In fact, sociologists who actually have done so have identified social rules for talking on the telephone. There are rules for determining whose turn it is to talk, for signaling that it's the other person's turn, and for determining how long silences can last before people become uncomfortable. (You might want to test this out the next time you're on the phone: How long can you remain silent before the other person speaks up?)

Instead of trying to extract abstract categories from social phenomena, as quantitative scholars do, qualitative researchers try to understand social processes *in context*. In addition, qualitative researchers pay attention to the subjective nature of human life—not only the subjective experiences of those they are studying but also the subjectivity of the researchers themselves. In other words, qualitative researchers try to understand

ings of social events for those who are involved in them. They also try to understand the researchers' own perspectives: How do researchers' own points of view affect how they conduct their work?

Because qualitative research consists of words, many people, especially beginning researchers, think that it is easier than quantitative research, especially since there are no mathematical formulas to remember, no statistics to puzzle over. But this isn't actually so. Qualitative research can actually be more difficult, because it involves complex issues of interpretation. Gathering data typically takes longer in qualitative research, and the researcher has to develop his or her analytical skills and apply them to texts. Learning to think sociologically in qualitative research involves not only developing a set of discrete methodological skills (such as interviewing or doing participant observation) but also learning how to move back and forth between theory and evidence. It involves learning the art of interpretation. But moving from people's everyday speech or activities to a sociological analysis is a very difficult skill to learn.

Consider some of the difficulties. Let's imagine that you have been observing children on a playground for several months. You have visited several times a week for an hour at a time, and you have tried to take accurate and detailed notes about what you have seen. You have observed children doing many things: playing hopscotch and soccer and four-square, chasing one another, talking, arguing, yelling, crying. You have many pages of notes that document, in detail, a slice of children's playground life. How do you then make sense of it all? How do you begin to identify larger social patterns? How do you move from your notes and observations to a sociological analysis? That's what this book aims to help you with.

WHY DO RESEARCH?

People conduct research for many reasons. Some do it because it's fun—they enjoy the challenge of gathering data and trying to make sense of it. Doing research is a process of exploration, a way of finding out things that they're interested in. Other people conduct research because they have to, perhaps as part of their degree requirement or their work. Many people have jobs that require some type of research skills. Social workers, for example, may need to do social research to find out if a particular program or policy is effective. They might want to know if welfare-to-work initiatives that aim to move poor women into the labor force actually work. Do they actually help poor women move out of poverty? Others, like community orga-

by professional researchers. Teachers may need to know, for example, if whole-language reading strategies work better than phonics for some children. Even if they do not want to do the research themselves, they need to know what others have found. They also need to know how to evaluate research, rather than simply accept it at face value. If several studies suggest that whole-language reading strategies work better and several others recommend phonics-based approaches, the teachers need to know how to reconcile what seem to be conflicting results.

Some researchers are motivated by a sense of social justice. They want to right what they see as social wrongs, and they want to use social research to aid in that effort. For example, Ronnie Steinberg has conducted research on pay inequities in order to help close the gap between men's and women's pay. She describes herself as a feminist social scientist who does advocacy work on behalf of women (1996, p. 225). Others are motivated by a deep curiosity about the social world. Although basic research, which is aimed at creating knowledge for its own sake, may not have an immediate, practical purpose, it helps us to understand social life. For example, sociologist Jack Katz (1996) analyzed how families interacted in a Paris fun house in order to understand the social construction of humor. Although this research may not have an immediate application, knowing more about how people construct humor may—or may not—ultimately have some practical use. Like Katz, many social scientists conduct research because it's a way of learning about things that interest them.

DEVELOPING A SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

We shouldn't think of social research methods as merely a set of cookbook procedures for obtaining information. Whether qualitative or quantitative, social research methods are intertwined with theoretical concerns. When you try to understand the social world, you are developing what C. Wright Mills (1959) called a *sociological imagination*: the ability to see individual issues within a larger social context. Developing this sociological imagination involves theorizing. Sometimes, students groan or their eyes glaze over when I mention theory. People often think that theory is necessarily boring or arcane and clearly not useful in the "real" social world. But the ability to theorize is a highly useful skill. Life would be very confusing without the ability to theorize. In fact, you theorize all the time—you just don't think about what you're doing in that way.

Any time you try to understand the world around you, you are theorizing. You have theories for why your professors act the way they do and what

will happen if you turn in an assignment late. You have theories for why some people get paid more than others and why some people go on to college and others do not. You may not formally frame those kinds of explanations, but they are theories nonetheless. What I mean by *theory* is not merely the abstractions you might encounter in a social theory class. You may have learned about Marx's theory of historical materialism or Durkheim's theory of social integration in your theory class. If so, you may have found the language used by these theorists laborious, perhaps difficult to understand. These are examples of theories that provide grand, overarching explanations of social phenomena. Although these types of explanation are certainly theory, they are not the only kind. Another way to think about theory is as a story about some event or some piece of the social world. A theory helps provide an explanation for a whole class of events. Some theories are highly abstract and difficult to understand; others are not. If you think about theories in this way, you can see that you use them all the time.

For example, let's say your parents immigrated to the United States before you were born. They have ways of doing things that they brought from their home country and ways of doing things they learned here. Because you were born in the United States, however, you feel clearly American. Yet you also have strong ties to your ethnic community. Sometimes, your parents seem too strict; other times, they seem just right. You probably have developed theories about why they act the way they do. One way of explaining your parents would be to theorize about why, *individually*, they act the way they do. You might see your mother as very strict in comparison with some of your friends' mothers, and maybe that is simply part of her personality. Or you might think about whether your family shares some commonalities with other immigrant families. In that case, you might want to theorize about how the experience of immigration affects family life. This would be an attempt to explain a whole class of families.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS: MOVING BETWEEN THEORY AND DATA

Before you can begin to conduct social research, you need to consider the relationship between theories and the empirical world. The empirical world is the world of the senses: the world you can see, hear, smell, touch, and (less frequently considered in the social sciences) taste. Traditional social research draws on the model of a natural scientist conducting research in a laboratory. In this tradition, often called the "scientific method," the main goal of

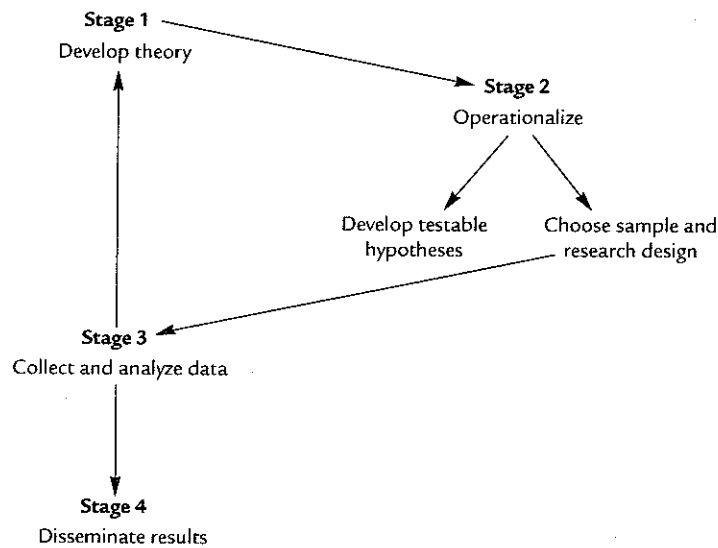


FIGURE 1.1 A Deductive Approach to Research

social research is theory construction and, most importantly, theory testing. Conventional social research uses *deductive reasoning*. That is, you begin with a theory and then deduce logical extensions of it, called hypotheses, that you can test.

The process of deductive reasoning is usually described as having several stages. The first stage involves developing a theory, usually based on the body of research that other scholars have already conducted. The second stage involves operationalizing the theory—that is, putting it in a testable form—by developing hypotheses and choosing a representative sample and a research design. The third stage involves actually carrying out the research: collecting data and conducting analyses. If the results of the test confirm the hypotheses, then the theory is considered more plausible. If not, the theory needs to be reconsidered and further research conducted. The final stage involves writing the results up and disseminating them either in a journal or book or in an oral presentation at a professional conference. Figure 1.1 summarizes the deductive reasoning process.

For example, Phyllis Moen wanted to investigate what factors might affect mothers' well-being. One theory suggested that when mothers work outside the home they experience role strain from being pulled in too many conflicting directions, and thus report greater stress (stage 1). Moen decided to test this hypothesis by measuring psychological distress among a sample of Swedish parents (stage 2). She found that the mothers reported much

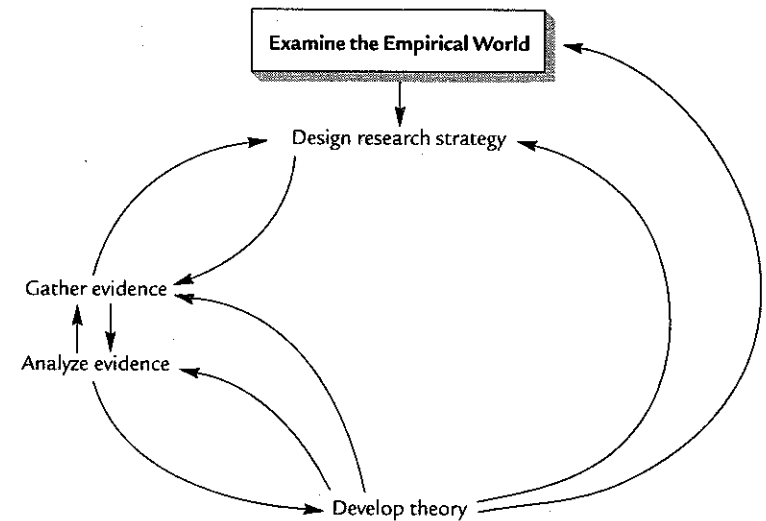


FIGURE 1.2 An Inductive Approach to Research

less distress in 1981 than they had in earlier periods, even though they were *more* likely to work outside the home in the later time period. Thus, she concluded that role strain isn't useful in understanding the effect of women's paid employment on their well-being (stage 3). She published this research in her 1989 book *Working Parents* (stage 4).

In qualitative research, investigators typically are less concerned with this kind of theory testing. Qualitative research often uses *inductive reasoning*. That is, rather than beginning with a particular theory and then looking at the empirical world to see if the theory is supported by "facts," you begin by examining the social world and, in that process, develop a theory consistent with what you are seeing. This approach, illustrated in Figure 1.2, is often called a "grounded approach" (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

For example, Susan Walzer (1998) also was interested in studying mothers' well-being, but in a very different way. She wanted to understand the process by which women and men become mothers and fathers—that is, how couples negotiate transitions to parenthood. Instead of beginning with a theory to test, however, she selected a sample of 50 new parents to interview in depth. As she analyzed the interviews, she realized that the experiences of the women seemed similar, as did the men's experiences. Based on her observations, she began to think about the different cultural meanings of parenthood for men and for women. The theories she developed to try to explain this gender differentiation arose from the empirical evidence she gathered.

There is a long history of grounded research within sociology. In the 1920s and for decades after, the University of Chicago served as a center of qualitative field research. Sociologists there saw the urban setting as a “social laboratory” for social scientists and social reformers (Park 1967). The Chicago School, as it was called, trained students to go out into the world and study the people and settings they encountered. Researchers trained in the Chicago School investigated, among other topics, Italian Americans living in an urban slum (Gans 1962), medical students (Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss 1961), and marijuana smokers (Becker 1963). These scholars were encouraged to see how their empirical research could be “integrated with” social theory (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991, p. 9). At the same time, prominent anthropologists like Margaret Mead, Franz Boas, and Bronislaw Malinowski were developing procedures for fieldwork within the field of anthropology. This kind of research—intensively studying a specific social group by observing the group in its natural setting—is known as ethnography and sometimes as participant observation. Researchers who do this work are called ethnographers.

Women scholars were active in the early years of Chicago School sociology—and even earlier. Harriet Martineau, for example, was one of the founders of sociology (one whose role has been little discussed until recently). Her book *Society in America*, published in 1837, is considered by some to be one of the earliest examples of ethnographic research (Deegan 1991; Reinhartz 1992). Later, in the period 1890–1920, a number of women scholars such as Jane Addams, Edith Abbott, and Sophonisba Breckenridge actively engaged in qualitative research. These women, many of whom were involved in applying the tools of sociology to the pressing problems of the day, had an impact on the development of sociology within the United States. In fact, Mary Jo Deegan, who has studied extensively the role of women in the history of sociology, argues that women scholars in the settlement movement both predated and actively shaped the contours of the more famous male scholars of the Chicago School (Deegan 1991).*

Sometimes, researchers move back and forth between inductive and deductive reasoning. Another way to think about the research process is as an ongoing dialogue between theoretical concerns and empirical evi-

*The settlement houses, established during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were centers of moral reform and progressive activism. Women involved with the settlement house movement were involved in a number of activities aimed at social improvement, including work on labor legislation (such as that establishing the 8-hour workday for women and children), housing, and public health and sanitation. The most famous was Hull-House in Chicago, established by Jane Addams in 1889. At Hull-House, women activists and scholars lived and supported each other. Some of the most important early women sociologists were associated with Hull-House and the settlement movement (Deegan 1991).

dence. If theories are stories about the way the world (or some portion of it) works, then they are always in a state of revision, and there are always other, alternative stories that could be told. In this sense, we are never really done theorizing, and we can rarely reject theories out of hand. Instead, we need to think about the multiple stories that might be told. At the same time, the process of telling stories alerts us to different features of the social world.

Michael Burawoy describes a process he calls “theory reconstruction” (Burawoy et al. 1991). He argues that one of the goals of research is to extend and improve existing theories based on an awareness of features of the empirical world that aren’t explainable by current theories. When we do research we find things that, based on our theories, we didn’t expect to find. But instead of interpreting these puzzles as a failure of the theories (and a need to reject them), he argues, we should use these “failures” to improve our theories.

Whatever you think about the relationship between theory and data, social research still entails some kind of movement between theoretical and empirical concerns. Different ways of thinking about the research process involve different *paradigms*, or worldviews. Rather than have your worldview remain implicit, or understood, it is much better to make it explicit. The choices researchers make about paradigms shape the research strategies they think they should use. These are partisan choices, and they reflect the training, sensibilities, and beliefs of researchers. That’s why, as researchers, you need to think reflexively—that is, to think about who you are and what your beliefs about the social world are—in order to make these decisions.

As basic worldviews, paradigms represent beliefs about the nature of reality and the ways in which we create knowledge. Scientific paradigms attempt to answer a number of questions about social research:

- ◆ What is the purpose of social research?
- ◆ Should social research aim to improve the social world or merely comment on it?
- ◆ What is the nature of social reality?
- ◆ Is there an objectively “knowable” world out there, or is all knowledge subjective?
- ◆ What constitutes a good explanation or theory?
- ◆ How does one evaluate any particular theory?

Paradigms are not provable. That is, you cannot prove that one paradigm is essentially better than another. The

paradigms shape the methodological choices you make and the relationships you see between theory and data.

In this chapter, I'll discuss five different research traditions. The first one, called positivism, has been the dominant tradition in sociology since World War II, especially in quantitative research. A number of new traditions, in addition to the earlier tradition of field research developed by the Chicago School, have developed in opposition to this way of doing research. I'll discuss four alternatives: naturalism, social constructionism, feminism and critical approaches, and postmodernism. What's most important is not that you remember the labels, but that you see how they point you toward different directions in your research.

POSITIVISM: TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO SOCIAL RESEARCH

Traditional approaches to social research are based on a paradigm known as *positivism*. In this tradition, the goal of social research is to discover a set of causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human behavior. Prediction is closely related to social control. If you can predict people's behavior, then you can also find ways to control it. Early positivists like Auguste Comte believed that sociology could become a "positive" science of society. By discovering the laws that governed social behavior, sociologists could develop policies that would improve, or even perfect, society.

The paradigm of positivism assumes that the social world is inherently knowable and that we can all agree on the nature of social reality. The social world thus has a regular order that social scientists can discover. Knowledge is created by deductive logic: finding ways to operationalize and then test social theories. Explanations in the form of causal reasoning are taken as "true" when they have no logical contradictions and are consistent with observed facts (empirical evidence). In this tradition, there is a sharp break between scientific ways of knowing and other ways of knowing (such as religion, intuition, or magic).

For example, suppose you have a theory that groups of oppressed people will protest when social conditions are at their worst. You go out and measure the social conditions (such as unfair laws, a lack of jobs and housing, and high arrest rates) of different groups of people. And you have good measures of protests—riots, demonstrations, and the like. What you find is that people seem to protest most not when social conditions are at rock bottom, as your theory predicted, but when things are improving. In this case, the empirical evidence (the measures of protests and social conditions) lo-

ically contradicts your theory. In the positivist tradition, you would have to reject your theory and come up with a new one. (This is, in fact, what many social researchers did.)

Social scientists who work within this tradition argue that social research must be value-free and objective. Social researchers must somehow free themselves from the social and cultural values that govern other kinds of human activity. They must transcend personal biases, prejudices, and values and remain neutral toward their object of study.

CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL WAYS OF DOING SOCIAL SCIENCE

There have been many challenges to the positivist tradition, on many grounds. For one thing, studying humans is different from studying other aspects of the natural world because human behavior isn't mechanistic. Humans have the capacity to reflect on their actions. In fact, when you study people, chances are they're going to change their behavior—even subtly—just because you are focusing on them. Molecules or atoms and other aspects of the physical world don't, by and large, do this. And unlike many features of the physical world, human behavior is very context sensitive. Thus, if you bring people into an experimental laboratory to study them, their behavior will be different from what it would be if you observe them in their homes or workplaces or other natural settings.

In addition, human reality is multifaceted. Humans can express themselves through art and literature and other forms of self-expression in addition to more goal-directed forms of behavior. Thus, some social scientists argue, it doesn't make sense to study humans using the same methodologies that physicists or chemists might.

Furthermore, in social research, humans are the researchers as well as the objects of study, which means that pure objectivity is impossible. We have a vested interest in what we study. As Dorothy Smith argues, "In the social sciences the pursuit of objectivity makes it possible for people to be paid to pursue a knowledge to which they are otherwise indifferent" (1987, p. 88). We are *not* indifferent to what we study! In fact, if we look at the ways in which social researchers have developed their theories and framed their research projects, we can see that these reflect the interests and priorities of the researchers. And because most researchers and theorists have come from the upper social classes, it's no surprise that much social research reflects the views of those people who have more power in

Theorists like Nancy Hartsock (1987), Sandra Harding (1986), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) have argued that, if researchers begin their investigation from the perspective of dispossessed groups, they will end up with a very different perspective than if they begin from the perspective of the wealthy and powerful. So, for example, if you begin from the standpoint of poor women, you probably wouldn't develop theories of welfare rooted in the assumption that poor women are "lazy" or don't want to work. Rather, you probably would begin with an entirely different understanding of the problem of welfare. For example, you might begin by looking at the realities of poor women's lives, such as the low wages available or the difficulty in gaining decent child care or health care.

Challengers to traditional ways of doing social science argue that all knowledge is created within human interaction. Who we are shapes the kinds of theories we create and the kinds of explanations we offer. Instead of assuming that objectivity is possible, then, we need to be reflexive: We need to develop an understanding of how our positions shape the research topics we choose and the methods we use to study the social world. Literally, what we see is shaped by who we are. Laura Ellingson (1998) discusses these issues in her research on cancer survivors. A survivor of bone cancer herself, she argues that her experiences gave her crucial insights into the worlds of cancer survivors and clinic staff. Not only did she have a more thorough "technical understanding" of the clinical setting than other researchers who did not share her background, she also had an increased empathy for the patients she was studying. "Although no one can fully understand another's experience," she argues, "I come closer to putting myself in the place of another than one who has never known life threatening illness" (1998, p. 497). Because of her experiences, the research process itself was not without pain. For example, when she observed a patient ask her clinician about an endoscopy, she experienced nausea and gagged, remembering her own endoscopy years earlier. The way in which Ellingson wrote up her research reflects her position. She interspersed her report with memories of her own cancer treatment.

"YOU ARE HERE": LOCATING THE SELF IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

"You are here." Have you ever seen a map at, say, a mall or a tourist attraction, that labels where you are in relation to other places of interest? Study-

ing these maps, you can figure out where you are and how to get to where you want to go. You need to do something similar in social research. Before you begin your research project, you have to consider where you stand on a number of important issues:

- ◆ What are your own biases and preconceptions?
- ◆ What are your own investments in particular issues and in particular ways of seeing the world?
- ◆ What do you already think you know, and how do you know it?

Instead of thinking of yourself as a neutral, disinterested observer, think about the connections that you bring to what you plan to study. We'll consider four research traditions that encourage you to ask these kinds of questions: naturalism, social constructionism, feminist and critical approaches, and postmodernism.

NATURALISM

One of the most influential approaches in qualitative research, especially as conducted by many anthropologists and other field researchers, has been *naturalism*. The goal of naturalistic forms of inquiry is to present the lives and perspectives of those being studied as faithfully as possible. Naturalistic research is often conducted in a particular geographic place (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). One of the best-known examples of this is *Tally's Corner*, a study of urban Black men whose lives centered around a particular street corner (Liebow 1967). Elliot Liebow wanted to understand the social lives of these men on their own terms. So, rather than begin with a concept like "delinquency," Liebow began by hanging out with the men to understand, as best he could, their experience.

The classic naturalist image is that of the field researcher who goes out into distant social worlds (either literally or figuratively) to study the people within them. In naturalistic inquiry, the researcher attempts to observe as carefully and accurately as possible and to present the stories of those being studied in their own voices. As Norman Denzin notes, this research is grounded in the "behaviors, languages, definitions, attitudes, and feelings of those studied" (1989, p. 71). To accomplish this, the researcher has to develop close, personal, and empathic relationships with those being studied; she or he has to become fully engaged with their world.

Although there are a few similarities between naturalistic and positivist research (the assumption, for example, that there is a “real world” out there that the researcher can document), there are many more differences. In naturalistic inquiry, the goal is not to abstract a few concepts and to determine the causal relationships among them, but to understand the social world of those being studied. The social context is crucial in naturalistic research. Typically, naturalistic researchers immerse themselves in their field settings, often living among those being studied for long periods of time. Rather than relying on impersonal methods (such as surveys or questionnaires), naturalistic observers rely on their own powers of observation or on in-depth personal interviews to collect data.

Although naturalism remains an important method within qualitative research, it is being supplanted by other paradigms. Critics have identified several problems with naturalism (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). For one thing, this tradition assumes that researchers can accurately portray the concerns and issues of those being studied. But the way in which they produce their social research privileges the researchers’ accounts. Once they have collected their data, they still must present the final story. Because researchers have the final say, as it were, their account carries more weight than the accounts of those being researched. Researchers get to choose what to present and what to leave out and how to portray those being studied. The people who have been made the objects of study might disagree with the conclusions, but because they are not writing the final report, their disagreements may not be aired.

Critics also argue that it is impossible for naturalistic researchers to produce objective accounts. Rather, naturalistic reports are always filtered through researchers’ perspectives. Also, when observing, researchers cannot attend to everything at once. For example, try to observe and write down everything that is going on in a classroom for just 10 or 15 minutes. You probably will not be able to see or hear everything or to understand all of what you see, and you certainly cannot write down everything. Therefore, you have to pick and choose among what you think is important. So it is with naturalistic research. The naturalistic observer selects what she or he thinks is important and, in this way, creates his or her own version of reality.

More fundamentally, the naturalistic perspective assumes that there’s a social world “out there” that can be faithfully studied and reproduced. Other critics, such as those we will consider next, argue that *all* social life is constructed. Everyday life, in this view, is created through social interaction, and the activity of “conducting research” is no different. Thus, we need to pay attention to the researcher and to the social process of research, as well as to those researched.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST AND INTERPRETIVE APPROACHES

Social constructionist and interpretive approaches are enormously varied. What they share, however, is the notion that all social reality is constructed, or created, by social actors. These approaches ask us to focus on interaction: How do humans act toward one another and the objects in their worlds? What meanings do they attach to them?

Interpretive approaches in social research are closely related to a theoretical tradition called *symbolic interactionism*, which rests on three premises (Blumer 1969, p. 2). The first is that humans act toward things based on the meanings those things have for them. For example, a European American might look at a bundle of bamboo or wood sticks and think of them as kindling or as merely sticks, without a particular use or purpose. But someone from China or someone who has traveled throughout Asia might look at that same bundle of sticks and see pairs of chopsticks. And to my daughter Katherine, that same bundle of sticks might become a group of imaginary friends, or dolls, who are playing together. Each of us acts toward the sticks (starting a fire with them, using them to eat with, playing with them) on the basis of the meanings they hold for us.

The second premise is that the meanings of things arise out of social interaction. For example, in Chinese culture, the notion that bamboo sticks are eating utensils called chopsticks (or, more accurately, *kuài zi*) is constructed through group life. The sticks have a special name that all can recognize. Children learn to eat with chopsticks at a very early age, and chopsticks are offered in restaurants and households as appropriate eating utensils. If someone hands you a pair of chopsticks, it is understood that they are to be used to eat with, not to build a fire with or plant with or for some other use.

The third premise is that meanings are created (and changed) through a process of interpretation. There is nothing in the bamboo or wood itself that tells us whether the sticks are dolls or eating utensils or fuel or any other thing. We understand their uses—that is, we create their meanings—through a process of interpretation. Thus, when chopsticks are placed beside a bowl at mealtime, we interpret that they are intended as eating utensils. While waiting for her food to arrive, however, my daughter may interpret them as toys. And if, in interaction with my daughter, I interpret the sticks as eating utensils, I may become annoyed and ask that she stop playing with them. But if I interpret them as toys, I can play along with her. Because humans are social creatures, however, our interpretations of reality

chopsticks as dolls or toys, hers is an idiosyncratic reading.* Creating and interpreting reality are essentially social processes.

What are the implications of this process of interpretation for qualitative research? First, this interpretive tradition assumes that researchers need to begin by examining the empirical world. That is, rather than begin with a theory or preconceived notion of the way the world works, researchers should begin by immersing themselves in the world inhabited by those they wish to study. This initial approach is similar to that of the naturalistic perspective. But instead of seeking to go “inside the worlds of their subjects,” the researchers’ emphasis is on understanding how individuals construct and interpret social reality (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, p. 38). There is no social reality apart from how individuals construct it, and so the main research task is to interpret those constructions. The focus is on how given realities are produced.

For interpretive scholars like Clifford Geertz, interpreting social reality is a lot like doing clinical work. Given a particular set of symptoms, these scholars ask, What could they mean? How can they be interpreted? Like a clinician, an interpretive researcher doesn’t predict (as is the goal of the positivist researcher); rather, she or he diagnoses. How do you tell if a piece of interpretive research is good research? It must ring true, or at least seem plausible, to the participants themselves, and it must help to explain the “symptoms.”

Because researchers, too, are human, the research process itself can be seen as a social production. The meanings of research are negotiated between and among researchers and research subjects, as well as among other social researchers. Researchers begin with the constructions social actors use to define what happens to them, but they do not stop there. As Clifford Geertz (1973) reminds us, researchers never truly capture the viewpoints of others. Researchers’ writings are always interpretations of what they *think* their research subjects are doing. But their insights are always limited, because they cannot know for certain what is really going on. In this regard, interpretive writing is akin to fiction, in that it is fashioned from a researcher’s interpretation, or best guess, of what is going on. But it is not wholly fiction because it is rooted in social actors’ actual lives; it is not simply made up.**

*Or, at least, it is partially so. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer who suggested that the use of chopsticks as dolls isn’t really idiosyncratic. Rather, it can be understood within the social construction of childhood as a distinct period of life organized in particular ways—for example, characterized by “play” instead of “work.”

**More recently, interpretive scholars have begun to examine the boundaries between fiction and social research. We will discuss these efforts shortly.

The next tradition we’ll consider is feminism and critical research. In some respects, the division between various traditions is not clear-cut. There are some researchers, for example, who think of themselves as feminist and as constructionist. Nonetheless, the distinction helps highlight some important differences in the aims of social research.

FEMINIST AND OTHER CRITICAL APPROACHES

Critical Social Research

Feminist and critical researchers are a diverse group comprising many researchers who might not be happy to be lumped together in this way. Generally, critical social research, including feminist research, seeks insight into the social world in order to help people change oppressive conditions. In this context, criticism doesn’t merely mean judging negatively; it also means, as feminist scholar Joyce Nielsen notes, exposing existing belief structures that “restrict or limit human freedom” (1990, p. 9). Whereas the goal of positivist research, described earlier, is to “predict and control” and the goal of interpretive research is to understand and interpret, the goal of critical social research is to work toward human emancipation.

For example, feminist researcher Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1996) studied immigrant women who did housecleaning in private households. But she wasn’t interested only in how these women organized their work lives. She also wanted to find ways to act as an advocate to improve the women’s working conditions, which typically included isolation, low pay, and opportunities for exploitation. With this in mind, she and her colleagues developed a set of novelas, or booklets that resemble comic books, that explain domestic workers’ rights and some strategies for increasing their pay and decreasing the possibility of exploitation.

Like Hondagneu-Sotelo, critical researchers pay close attention to the underlying mechanisms that account for unequal social relations. They want to examine the nature of inequality and work toward the empowerment of those with less power. Thus, they want to understand not only people’s subjective feelings and experiences but also the material world and power relations within it. Because oppression is reproduced most easily when people view oppressive conditions as natural or inevitable (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998, p. 263), many critical researchers focus on how oppressive conditions are constructed and maintained over time. In doing so, many critical researchers hope to uncover myths that maintain oppression (for example,

myths about welfare mothers or immigrant domestic workers). Critical researchers also hope to communicate their findings to people—especially the people they study—so that they can use them to fight oppression.

How can you tell if an explanation is true or false in critical social science? As a first step, it is important to know if the descriptions are plausible to those being researched. At the same time, “good” critical research teaches people about their own experiences, gives them insight into their place in the social world, and helps them transform the world. Because of the nature of oppression, those in less powerful positions may not always be able to see clearly the ways in which their reality is shaped and limited by what Dorothy Smith (1987) calls the “relations of ruling.” Critical social science is action-oriented; thus, values are involved. Critical researchers argue that social research is, itself, a moral and political activity. Scientific activity is never neutral, and it can be used as a source of social control. Thus, researchers must not only be aware of their own values but also embrace a set of carefully considered values.

Feminist Research

A feminist approach in sociology emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s out of an interaction between feminist activists and sociologists (Laslett and Thorne 1997). Since that time, a vibrant body of research and theory and a network of scholars has developed. Feminist approaches to social science are extraordinarily diverse. Although some feminist scholars may take a more liberal approach and others a more radical one, what they share is a sense that social science as traditionally conducted does not fully take into account the presence of women in social life and the range of women’s concerns. When feminist scholars looked at traditional sociological topics like work and occupations, and organizations, and at existing theory, they found that women’s perspectives were not included. Apart from a few areas such as sociology of the family, women were essentially missing in sociological theory and research.

Feminist scholars have been among the most important critics of traditional ways of doing social science. Not all feminist social research is qualitative, and not all feminist scholars agree with one another on issues of theory and method. Still, feminist critiques have played an important role in transforming social research methodologies.

Understanding the distinction between methodology and method might be useful in highlighting the depth of the challenge feminist scholars

posed. *Methods* are the actual tools or techniques that scholars might use, such as conducting a survey or interview. *Methodology* refers to the “theory and analysis of how research should proceed” (Harding 1987, p. 2). Feminist scholars have called for a transformation not so much in the concrete methods that social scientists might use but in the methodologies. And this makes sense. Researchers from a variety of paradigms might use very similar techniques when observing or asking questions. But how they think about these techniques and how they analyze the evidence they have amassed may differ radically.

Some of the earliest feminist scholars challenged social scientists to include women as subjects in their research. They also encouraged social researchers to study the contributions of earlier women social scientists whose work had been ignored or forgotten, like Harriet Martineau and Jane Addams. Increasingly, feminist scholars have argued that the very theories and methodologies social scientists have used are fundamentally flawed. Scholars such as Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins recommend a fundamental reshaping of the social research process. In an early influential statement, for example, Ann Oakley (1981) argued that the pretense of objectivity in interviews actually prohibits a deeper understanding of women’s lives. In her interview studies of new mothers, she found that sharing her own experiences of mothering facilitated a much richer understanding of the women.

Dorothy Smith has argued for a fundamental transformation of sociology, urging that we create a sociology *for* women. Such a sociology would begin from the standpoint of women and be rooted in women’s experiences of daily life. But it would not end there. The purpose of such a sociology would be to locate women’s experiences in a broader network of ruling relations, which includes a complicated set of social practices and social institutions such as government, the military, business, and the media (Smith 1987, p. 3). It would seek to understand how women’s lives are shaped by forces outside of their control. Yet, in looking at these larger-level forces, such a sociology must not lose sight of women’s real and subjective experiences. Smith argues, “The development of a feminist method in sociology has to go beyond our interviewing practices and our research relationships to explore methods of thinking that will organize our inquiry and write our sociological texts so as to preserve the presence of actual subjects while exploring and explicating the relations in which our everyday worlds are embedded” (1987, p. 111).

Just as feminist scholarship challenged traditional methods, so has it come under challenge. In its earliest formulations, feminist scholarship

often focused on the experiences of White, middle-class, and heterosexual women. The resulting theories and accounts thus did not necessarily reflect the experiences of women in all their diversity. Women of color, lesbians, disabled women, and others have challenged feminist scholars to be more inclusive in their scholarship (see, for example, Cannon, Higginbotham, and Leung 1991). Recent scholarship focusing on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality has expanded and transformed this earlier feminist research.

What are the implications of feminist critiques of social research? Shulamit Reinharz (1992) argues that feminism is a perspective, not a method. In her survey of feminist methodologies, she identified a number of themes that characterize feminist research, including a critical stance toward traditional methodologies and theories, the goal of creating social change, the desire to represent human diversity, and the attempt to think about the relationship between researcher and those being researched. At the very least, feminist scholars argue, the experiences of women in all their diversity are important and must be included in designing and carrying out research. At their most expansive, feminist scholars argue that traditional methodologies themselves must be transformed.

POSTMODERNISM

The final research tradition we'll consider is *postmodernism*. Some scholars believe that social conditions have changed so dramatically that we have entered a new, postmodern era in which previous ways of knowing are no longer useful (see, for example, Gergen 1991). As traditional bases of authority have been undermined, they say, a variety of competing perspectives have replaced established ways of knowing. Although those who have been influenced by postmodernism may not agree on much, they tend to agree that there is not one reality, but instead a number of different realities and ways of knowing, all equally valid.

Some argue that the postmodern world is, increasingly, a world made up of texts and images characterized by a *hyperreality*, "a term used to describe an information society socially saturated with ever-increasing forms of representation: filmic, photographic, electronic, and so on" (Kincheloe and McLaren 1998, p. 269). As people are exposed to this rapidly growing number and variety of images and types of information, there is the erosion of what some call "master narratives," or single theories as all-encompassing explanations. There can no longer be one coherent, objective theory

to explain social phenomena, but rather multiple stories, positions, and representations.

Postmodernism poses a crisis for previously accepted ways of knowing (and, hence, for qualitative research) that centers on two issues (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). First, postmodernists question whether "qualitative researchers can directly capture lived experience" (1998, p. 21). If there is no one objective reality, then a researcher cannot, of course, capture that reality in a study. If the self is fragmented, as scholars like Kenneth Gergen (1991) argue, then how can a researcher be fully reflexive (see also Gergen and Gergen 2000)? How can a researcher maintain a unified stance toward the subjects of his or her research?

The second issue revolves around what has been called the "legitimation crisis" (Lincoln and Denzin 2000). This crisis arose when anthropologists and other social scientists criticized the authority of the written text—that is, the idea that texts can be considered "accurate, true, and complete" (Lincoln and Denzin 2000, p. 1051). In the postmodern perspective, texts are always partial, limited, and rooted within a particular viewpoint. If all knowledge is limited and socially constructed, then how do we evaluate and interpret social research? If there is no one reality, but merely a variety of perspectives, then traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting social research simply are not relevant.

Not surprisingly, scholars who have been influenced by postmodernism are not a unified group. There are substantial debates about what postmodernism is and what its implications are for doing qualitative research. For example, if there is no single reality or truth to be told, then there is no one "right" way of doing research or interpreting data. Rather, there are multiple stories, from multiple perspectives, that might be told. Qualitative research accounts are always incomplete and uncertain, because all knowledge is provisional. This has led some researchers to experiment with new forms of research—what George Marcus called "messy texts" (1998). So, for example, some researchers have experimented with the boundaries between qualitative research and fiction (Krieger 1991) and poetry (Richardson 1992). In her study of unmarried mothers, Laurel Richardson (1992) decided to write a poem, using the respondent's own words, to portray the life story of one of her informants, named Louisa May. She felt that by doing so she could portray Louisa May's life much more faithfully than if she had produced a simple transcript. In addition, if all knowledge is created by someone, then it is important to understand who that someone might be. Even if the self is, ultimately, fragmented and unknowable, it is important to consider the ways in which researchers are situated in particular,

MAKING CLAIMS ABOUT PARADIGMS

By now, you might be wondering why you've been reading what seems to be a philosophical discussion. Why should you care about paradigms? Why does a book about research methods have to be phrased so abstractly? I argue that if you don't think about them explicitly you will still be operating within the constraints of a paradigm. You just won't be doing it consciously, as a result of choices that *you* make. Throughout the rest of the book, I will try to show you how the choices you make about research traditions influence the research strategies that are available to you. For now, I urge you to think about which tradition(s) seem to make the most sense to you and which ones seem most plausible. This is a first step toward creating your own research project.

QUESTIONS FOR THOUGHT

1. Think about the different traditions you have just read about. Which ones seem more reasonable to you? Why? Do any seem less plausible to you? Why?
2. Have any readings in sociology particularly interested you? If so, which ones? What kinds of perspectives did they take? Why were the readings so compelling?
3. Think about who you are. What kind of family do you come from? Where do you live? What kinds of experiences have been most important to you in shaping your values? Now, think about someone who seems very different from you. If you are relatively young, you might think about someone who is older. If you live in a city, you might think about someone who lives on a farm. Or, if you are gay or lesbian, you might think about someone who is heterosexual. Now consider a social issue that you see as important. How might you go about researching it? How might someone who is very different from you think about the same subject?

EXERCISES

1. Try this one with a friend. Go to a public place—a library, shopping mall, cafeteria, or similar place—to observe. Observe for about 20 minutes. While you are doing so, take careful notes on everything you think is

important. After you have finished, read each other's notes. Did you both notice the same things? What differences do you see? Why do you think you saw things differently? How did your personal experiences give you somewhat different perspectives?

2. Every day for a week, read a national newspaper, such as the *New York Times*. As you go through the paper, look for stories that report the results of social research. How can you tell that social research is being reported? Can you think of any ways that the research being reported might be useful?
3. Try to find several qualitative research reports in the library. (You might browse, for example, through journals like *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Gender & Society*, *Symbolic Interaction*, or *Qualitative Inquiry*.) If your library provides access to a computer database that lets you print out whole articles, like Infotrac or EBSCOhost, you might search any topic that interests you. Or you can search using terms like "qualitative research" or "qualitative methods" or "qualitative study." These will yield too many citations for you to look at each one, but you can browse through to find ones that interest you. Alternatively, you might try to find writings by some of the researchers mentioned in this chapter. Once you've located several qualitative research reports, see if you can find descriptions of the researchers themselves. Do they give any personal information about themselves? Do they describe how they became interested in the topic? How do you think researchers' personal lives affect the choices they make?
4. Go back to the research reports that you found in Exercise 3. What kind of reasoning did the researchers use—inductive or deductive? How can you tell?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Examples of Qualitative Research

- Becker, Howard; Blanche Geer; Everett Hughes; and Anselm Strauss. *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, [1961] 1977. A classic Chicago School study of the socialization of medical students.
- Burawoy, Michael, et al. *Ethnography Unbound: Power and Resistance in the Modern Metropolis*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. A collection of short ethnographies written by graduate students at the University of California, Berkeley, each of which uses the process of theory reconstruction.

- Kondo, Dorinne. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. An innovative study, influenced by postmodernism, of self and identity in a Japanese workplace.
- Liebow, Elliott. *Tally's Corner*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1967. A classic field study of urban Black men.
- Stacey, Judith. *Brave New Families: Stories of Domestic Upheaval in Late Twentieth Century America*. New York: Basic Books, 1991. A feminist analysis of postmodern family life.
- Stack, Carol. *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*. New York: Harper, 1974. An important study of family and kinship in an urban Black community.
- Whyte, William Foote. *Street Corner Society*, 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1943] 1993. A study of Italian Americans in Boston's North End; one of the most widely read and influential field studies.

Resources on Research Paradigms

- Lincoln, Yvonna S., and Egon G. Guba. "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences." Pp. 163–188 in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. An overview of research paradigms and the controversies surrounding them.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999. A look at research from a feminist perspective.

General Resources on Qualitative Research

- Denzin, Norman K., and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. A comprehensive guide.

2

Strategies for Beginning Research

GETTING STARTED: WHERE TO BEGIN?

Getting started is often one of the hardest tasks for beginning researchers. How do you know if you have a good idea for a research project? How can you tell if the research project is doable? Just as important, how can you tell if the research is worth doing? Even experienced researchers sometimes have trouble finding a topic, beginning a new research project, figuring out how to start, choosing a research strategy, or developing a general research plan.

The first step in any research project is deciding on a general topic and then refining the topic. Suppose you are interested in homelessness or in students' alcohol use. Homelessness in general would be far too big a topic—even for someone doing a Ph.D. dissertation—so you would have to find a way to make your research more manageable. You could focus on just one aspect of homelessness, such as the experiences of workers in homeless shelters or the effects of homelessness on children. To narrow down the topic of student alcohol use, you could focus on the role of alcohol at student parties or the effects of alcohol consumption on academic achievement. You also need to think about the different approaches you could take to your research, as reflected in the paradigms discussed in Chapter 1. But what do you do if you don't know what general topic interests you? How do

GENERATING IDEAS

How do you generate useful, interesting ideas? It's hard to give sound advice on finding good research topics, for several reasons. One problem is that we don't usually think about where good ideas come from. They seem somehow serendipitous, a stroke of magnificent luck. Suppose you are walking down the street and suddenly notice that most of the streetlights are out on one block but functioning on the next. You also notice that the trash seems to be picked up on that block but not on the first one. This leads you to wonder about how different neighborhoods gain access to city services. Or suppose you read an article in the newspaper or see a program on TV that sparks your curiosity about how homeless people survive in the winter in cold climates. Or maybe you have a long-standing interest in sports or young children, and so research ideas seem to come naturally. These are all legitimate ways to identify a research topic. If you don't have any interests at all, you'll find it difficult to find an interesting research topic. But most of us are interested in at least *something*.

Often, qualitative researchers begin where they are. That is, they look at their own lives to see if they can find anything interesting to study, an unusual angle or puzzling event or phenomenon. Then they try to refine the topic into a more manageable—and researchable—form.

For example, Carol Freedman, a graduate student raising a young child, needed to do a research project for a course on research methods. She had been participating in a mothers' group, and so she decided to study it. The project eventually became her master's thesis, titled "Setting Stay-at-Home Standards: An Ethnographic Study of the Southland Mothers Association" (Freedman 1997).

Elliot Liebow wrote in the preface to his book *Tell Them Who I Am* that he had been diagnosed with cancer and had a limited life expectancy, so he decided to volunteer at a soup kitchen. As he put it, "I did not want to spend my last months on the 12th floor of a government office building, so at 58 I retired on disability from my job of 20-some years as an anthropologist with the National Institute of Mental Health" (1993, p. viii). Because he felt pretty good for a lot longer than he expected, he started volunteering at a homeless shelter as well. He became interested in the lives of the women at the shelter, so he began taking field notes and thinking about the shelters as a site in which to do research. Ultimately, he did an in-depth study of the lives of homeless women.

Other researchers, too, have written about how they developed their research interests. Lynn Davidman (1999) wrote about the experience of losing her mother to cancer.

decision to study what she calls "motherloss." The point is, if you look around at your own environment, you may find the beginnings of a research topic.*

But should you stop there? What would happen if researchers began only with their own experiences and never considered others' perspectives? In framing research questions, it's important to remember that how people select research problems is not a neutral process. Rather, research questions always reflect *someone's* interests and priorities—either the researcher's or, if the researcher is getting funding from someone else, the people who are doing the funding. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, you do need to think about the variety of perspectives that different people bring to research projects.

Consider the following example: City officials in a midwestern city became concerned with drug use in a poor section of town. That section contained a low-income public housing complex, populated mainly by poor women and their children, that was in bad condition, with leaky roofs, dilapidated interiors, and crumbling steps. City officials convened a series of meetings at the housing complex to try to deal with the problem. A number of people attended the meetings, including the managers of the housing complex, members of an antidrug task force, various government officials, the police, a legal aid attorney, residents of the housing complex, and a few university researchers.

Over the course of the meetings, it became clear that the women who lived in the complex didn't see drugs as a major problem in their community. The main problem, from their perspective, was the dilapidated condition of the buildings they lived in. They also felt harassed by the complex security guards, most of whom were off-duty police officers. But the managers of the complex didn't see things in the same way at all. They felt that if the women could just "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" and get jobs (or husbands with jobs), they would pay more rent and the buildings would soon be fixed. They felt the security guards were needed to protect the buildings and that if the women hadn't broken any laws then they had nothing to fear from the police. The legal aid attorney had yet another interpretation of the problem—as a civil rights violation. Finally, one graduate student researcher who was studying the meetings interpreted the dynamics between management, police, government officials, and the tenants in terms of state attempts to control poor women (Masuda 1998).

*If you're interested in learning more about how researchers come up with their topics, you might want to read...

So whose interpretation of the situation was correct? What was the “real” problem? Was it drugs? Dilapidated housing? Police harassment? Social control? It depends on whose perspective you take. This is what I mean when I say that problems are never neutral. A problem is always a problem *for* someone. Sociologists sometimes refer to this as the “definition of the situation.” In any social setting, people make assumptions about what they think is happening and how to interpret the actors and events. Researchers are also involved in a process of social interaction. They, too, make assumptions about what they think is happening and define the situation in diverse ways. How researchers choose to frame their research questions reflects their sense of what “the” problem is. What if you were going to research this situation? Whose perspective would you take into account? Why?

DECIDING WHAT TO RESEARCH

When you are first deciding what to research, you need to ask yourself a number of questions. First, what do you already know about the topic? And if you don't know very much, how can you get more information? Going to the library or searching the Internet are good ways to learn more about a topic (and we'll discuss these further later in the chapter), but they're not the only ways. You can also talk to other people, such as a professor or another student, who have an interest in the topic. You can visit places to get more information. For example, if you are interested in homeless people, you might volunteer at a shelter or visit the site.

A second question you need to consider is, How do you feel about your potential topic? Do you have very strong feelings about it? If so, your feelings might lead you to focus on one particular area and avoid others or blind you to other perspectives. You may be too biased to do a good job or to understand others' points of view. It's important to remain open to a variety of perspectives.

Being a member of the group you are studying can be both positive and negative. People often have strong feelings about the people and groups they are involved with. If you are studying a familiar group, you'll need to be especially careful to remain open-minded. For example, imagine that you are a member of a campus sorority or fraternity. You know that students who aren't involved in these groups often have negative opinions about them, and you want to do research to try to counter these stereotypes. Your involvement helps you gain access to members, and that is certainly positive. But you are so invested in showing the positive side that

to see any other points of view. In this case, being a member might hinder your ability to do good research.

As you develop your research project, you need to keep an open mind about the people and events in your research setting and to remain open to multiple definitions of the situation. If you close yourself off to alternative explanations too soon, you may miss important insights into your research setting.

How Do You Turn a Topic into a Question?

Once you've settled on a general topic, it's time to turn it into a research question. In qualitative research, your research question may shift once you begin your investigation. In fact, many scholars argue that a good qualitative researcher must have the ability to remain open to what the field setting or research site has to offer. They believe that the most important thing is simply to go out into the field to see what is out there. I argue that an initial focus is important. Even though your research question may change—and sometimes dramatically—once you begin work, you still need to start somewhere. Otherwise, you may have difficulty figuring out how to begin your research. As your research progresses, however, you need to keep an open mind to other questions that may arise in the course of your research—questions that may be even more important than the ones you initially devised.

As a first step, try brainstorming a list of questions about your topic. Then you can evaluate whether the questions can be answered using the resources you have at hand. Let's say you're interested in the general topic of abortion, but you're not sure how to narrow your topic down. Try asking some questions:

- ◆ What is the experience of abortion like for women?
- ◆ How do activists on both sides of the debate think about abortion? What do they think women's roles should be?
- ◆ How do abortion clinic staff deal with the threats of violence? Does it change the way they think about their work?
- ◆ How have media portrayals of abortion changed over time?

Notice how these questions are all answerable, at some level, with reference to the empirical world (the world of the senses). You could ask women who have had abortions what their experience is like; you could observe the staff in a clinic; you could examine news accounts of abortion to see how they

Compare those questions with, say, the following:

- ◆ Is abortion a good or a bad thing?
- ◆ Should women be able to choose to have an abortion?

These kinds of questions really can't be answered with reference to the empirical world. While they may be important *ethical* questions, they aren't amenable to social research. Thus, you need to consider whether the research questions you propose can be answered with reference to the "real" world.

You also need to ask yourself what your own assumptions about abortion and the women who have them are. If you have had an abortion yourself or know someone who has had one, that will certainly shape your thinking about the topic. If you have strong feelings pro or con, those will influence your initial question as well. You need to consider whether your own investments in the issue will allow you to investigate it with an open mind.

Is the Topic Interesting?

Next, you need to consider whether your research question is interesting. A good qualitative researcher can make just about any topic interesting. But if you are bored by or indifferent to your project, you probably ought to choose another one. Doing qualitative research can take a long time, and completing a research project—even one that you are interested in—can be difficult. It's tough to keep going when you're bored by your topic. Sometimes, beginning researchers pick questions because they think they will be easy or because their professor or adviser suggested the topic. These are poor reasons to choose a topic, unless, of course, you already have an interest in the topic. No research project is truly easy, and even the easiest research becomes difficult when you don't want to do it.

Whose Perspective Should You Take?

Once you've settled on a tentative research question, you need to think about how you will begin to approach it. At this stage, consider how taking different perspectives will lead you to embark on very different research projects. If your topic is homelessness, for example, you will find yourself moving down a very different path if you decide to study workers in homeless shelters than if you decide to study homeless people themselves. Sim-

ilarly, you will find yourself doing a very different research project if you choose to conduct your research in a small shelter that houses homeless women and their families rather than a large shelter that provides temporary housing for single men. Try to list as many perspectives as you can before you settle on a tentative focus. But even then, it's important to keep a questioning attitude. And as you continue with your work, you should remain open to as many perspectives as possible.

You also need to consider how different paradigms might shape different approaches to your research. Although you do not need to settle on a paradigm at this early stage, it's helpful to think about how these choices will affect your research. With a social constructionist approach, for example, you would want to pay close attention to how individuals define and create social reality. With a critical approach, you would want to frame your research so that it would be useful in creating social change.

Let's consider the example of education in preschools and kindergartens. A feminist researcher might focus on gender relations in the classroom—perhaps on how boys and girls interact and how gender is produced through that interaction (see, for example, Thorne 1993). A social constructionist might focus on interaction as well. But this researcher might be more interested in exploring how children come to define the classroom as a "school" and how they learn the expectations for behaving in that setting (see, for example, Corsaro and Molinari 2000). A postmodernist might focus on the multiple and fragmented realities within and around the school setting: the realities of children, teachers, administrators, and others. This researcher might explore children's cartoons, commercial culture, and other texts that shape children's realities. A positivist might begin with a theory about education—for example, that children who attend preschool adjust better to kindergarten than those who do not—and focus the research on that question.

Is the Research Feasible?

Once you've settled on a tentative question, you need to ask whether you can actually do the research. For example, if you are interested in studying people in homeless shelters, you need to get permission from the shelter staff (probably the director) and from the residents themselves. Some groups are relatively easy to gain access to (such as other students); others are relatively difficult (such as people who are involved in illegal activities, like drug smugglers). You may also need to gain permission from an institutional review board at your school, which scrutinizes projects for ethical

Once you've determined that you can gain access to the group you are interested in studying, you need to think about what other resources you will need. First, consider *time*. Doing qualitative research can take a great deal of time. If you are trying to study a group to which it may be difficult to gain access or that may be hostile to researchers, be sure you have enough time to develop the kinds of relationships you will need to do the research. For example, suppose you are interested in illegal drug use, as anthropologist Steven Koester is (Koester 1994). Specifically, you are interested in how HIV might be transmitted among street people who inject drugs. It will take a long time before they trust you enough to confide in you, so you need to consider whether you have enough time to gain trust.

Another important resource is *money*. Doing qualitative research can cost money. If you are going to do the research full-time, you still need to support yourself. If you are going to interview people, you need to purchase or have access to a reliable tape recorder and audiotapes. You also might have to hire someone to transcribe interview tapes, unless you plan to do it yourself. You may have to travel somewhere else to get to your research population or to find documents in an archive. You may need to purchase films or other texts to analyze. And there may be other costs as well.

The question of feasibility can be particularly difficult if you are trying to conduct a research project over the course of a semester. You may have great ideas for research projects, but the projects are too ambitious to be carried out over 14 or so weeks. Once you finally gain access to your research population or data, it is the end of the semester and time to wrap things up. Thus, you may find it easier to begin with a setting that you already know or can gain access to. But this means you'll have to be especially careful about the preconceptions and biases you bring to your work.

Is the Research Worth Doing?

A final issue is whether you *should* do a particular project. Just because you are interested and have the resources you need, it doesn't mean you should actually do the research. The key issue is whether the research has any potential uses or benefits. Will your research make a contribution, either to individuals or to a larger group or to our general knowledge base? Does it have the capacity to harm anyone—either yourself or the research participants? Before you begin any research project, you need to consider the potential benefits and risks. (These ethical issues will be considered in detail in Chapter 3.)

Again, let's say you are interested in researching people in homeless shelters. You think the study might have potential benefits because people

might be more sympathetic to the problems of the homeless if they understood what their lives were like. They might be more interested in building affordable housing or having the government spend more money on subsidized homes. While the research might not have an immediate positive impact on the participants' themselves, you think that in the long run your work might help debunk stereotypes about homeless people.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH STRATEGY

Once you've chosen a topic and framed a research question, you need to develop a research strategy. Specifically, you need to address these questions:

- ◆ How will you gather the data?
- ◆ What kind of population or setting will you study?
- ◆ Will you use in-depth interviews, or do an observational study, or work with "texts" (which can include things like books and magazines but also media such as TV shows, movies, and songs)?
- ◆ How will you begin to analyze and make sense of the data you have collected?

Different research traditions suggest somewhat different strategies. We'll consider these next.

Different Traditions, Different Starting Points

Depending on which research tradition you choose, you will begin your research from very different starting points. Before you get too far in your work, then, you need to consider which tradition(s) makes the most sense to you. According to the positivist paradigm, which we discussed in Chapter 1, the goal of social research is theory testing. Thus, in this tradition, you need to settle on a theory *before* you begin your research. Researchers who work within this tradition usually spend much time researching what others have found about their topic. They then develop *hypotheses*, or statements that can be tested, based on these theories, which often are framed in causal language: "x causes (or affects) y" or "The more of x, the less of y." Then they develop a research design that they can use to test their hypotheses. They use the results of their empirical tests to determine whether their theory is useful.

Let's say you're interested in rational choice theory (Friedman and Hechter 1988), which states that people act according to their best interests. Specifically, you're interested in applying rational choice theory to divorce. You think that, if people feel they will get more out of divorcing than staying in a marriage, they will choose to divorce. You're aware that raising children after a divorce can be hard, so you think that people with children have less to gain from a divorce than those without. Your hypothesis might be this: Couples who have children are less likely to divorce than couples who have no children. You could test this by comparing the divorce rate of couples who have children with that of couples who do not.

Qualitative researchers rarely work within this positivist tradition. That is, they are much less likely to test hypotheses than are quantitative researchers and are much more likely to work within one of the other traditions discussed in Chapter 1. Instead of *beginning* with a theory, qualitative researchers are more likely to begin with an examination of the empirical world. In the naturalistic and constructionist traditions, researchers immerse themselves in the social worlds of their research subjects. Only when they have been in a setting for a long time do they begin to develop theories. Some call this a *grounded theory* perspective (Charmaz 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1998), in which the aim is to develop theory grounded in the empirical world. If you choose this approach, your first step is to decide on a field setting or site for your research. At this stage, although you should do a library search to determine if others have studied the same kinds of sites, you should not try to develop testable hypotheses. Rather, you should focus on how you might gain access to the site and begin building relationships with the people there.

Researchers working within a critical research tradition might decide to do *action research*, in which the objective is to produce some kind of social change. For example, you might work with a coalition that seeks to end homelessness in your community. In this case, you first need to identify the stakeholders—the people who have a stake in eliminating homelessness. Obviously, people without homes do, but who else? Shelter workers? Community agencies? Neighborhood residents? You also need to identify who has the power to effect change and what the people you are working with think needs researching. For example, they might believe that the research should focus on the cost of housing in the community and on people's wages. In action research, rather than begin with a theory, you need to begin with a clear statement of the needs and priorities of the group.

While the discussion of research paradigms in Chapter 1 may have seemed abstract, the choice of a paradigm has real-life implications. The

choices you eventually make will determine whether you turn first to the published research, or to the empirical world. In research that draws on the positivist tradition, you need to have well-developed hypotheses before you begin your research. In research that draws on the naturalistic or constructionist traditions, you need to frame a general research question and choose a site for your research. In research that draws on postmodernist traditions, you might focus on texts. In this approach, although it's a good idea to read at least some of the published literature before you begin (and many researchers, myself included, would insist that you do so), you don't begin with already formed hypotheses. Instead, you develop your theory and an increasingly refined research question as you conduct the research.

Types of Research Strategies

Once you have settled on a research question and research tradition, you need to decide how you will collect your data. Specifically, you need to address these issues:

- ✦ What research strategy will you use?
- ✦ What population or site will you study?
- ✦ What texts will you choose?
- ✦ What will your evidence consist of? Transcripts of interviews? Observational notes? Archival materials, like letters or diaries or an organization's records? Songs or videotapes of TV programs?
- ✦ How will you spend your time? Listening and talking to people? Observing? Going through published materials? Watching audio-tapes?

You can choose from several general research strategies. Which one you settle on depends on your research question, the research tradition you see yourself as working in, and your own individual preferences.

Observational Studies In the naturalistic or constructionist traditions, you might conduct an *observational study*, in which you gather data by observing interaction in a particular site (such as a street corner or homeless shelter). Observational studies are useful when you want to understand how people behave in a particular setting or when you want an in-depth understanding of a particular culture or group. In an observational study, you might choose

to participate. For example, you might volunteer at a homeless shelter, as Elliot Liebow, whom we discussed in Chapter 1, did. Or you might choose simply to observe in a public place (such as a shopping mall or a public park), without participating.

Interviews Many qualitative researchers choose to conduct formal in-depth *interviews* with people. These can be relatively structured or unstructured. Interviews are good research techniques when you want to know what people think or feel about something. Researchers often combine observational techniques with either formal or informal interviews. In formal interviews, the researcher sets a particular time and place for an interview. Informal interviews tend to arise spontaneously in the course of observation. For example, you might decide to formally interview people who volunteer in a homeless shelter in order to understand their experiences, as well as to observe and informally interview shelter residents.

Unobtrusive Measures Not all research involves talking with or observing people. *Unobtrusive research* involves examining human traces, or evidence of human activity. For example, if you want to know which magazines in the library are most popular, you might study which ones seem to have thumbed pages or seem to have been heavily perused. A number of researchers have studied public graffiti. Caroline Cole (1991), for example, analyzed the writing on walls in women's bathrooms, arguing that the graffiti there served as an alternative means of communication. Jeff Ferrell (1995) analyzed hip-hop graffiti in Denver, Colorado, combining participant observation of graffiti writers with visits to graffiti sites in other cities. He argues that hip-hop graffiti reflects young people's efforts to resist social control.

Sometimes, researchers study "texts" such as newspapers, books, organizational records, TV shows, and court transcripts. For example, Sharon Hays wanted to investigate what she called the "cultural contradictions of motherhood" (1996). To do so, she analyzed child-rearing manuals to identify the kinds of social norms for mothering contained in them and conducted in-depth interviews with mothers of small children to determine how they actually viewed their mothering.

Triangulation Each research strategy has particular strengths and weaknesses. For example, in-depth interviews can provide insight into people's thoughts and feelings, but people's behaviors don't always match their words. Analysis of texts can tell you about social ideals for behavior, but the

texts can't tell you how people actually respond to them. For this reason, researchers often use two or more research strategies. This is called *triangulation*. Because different data collection strategies have different strengths and weaknesses, research designs that include multiple research strategies tend to be the strongest ones.

READING THE LITERATURE

Whichever research tradition and strategy you choose, you should visit the library early in the process of designing your research. Although some naturalistic researchers caution against becoming too wedded to a particular theory or viewpoint before immersing yourself in your field setting, I think this concern is a little overstated. By knowing what other researchers have already said about your topic, you are in a better position to come up with a well-thought-out research plan. And at some point during the research process, you will still need to conduct a literature review to help you place your own research in context.

I recommend that you begin any research project by simply browsing. Look through the journals and books that seem most interesting to you, or browse through the databases available at your library. I usually skim through the abstract or the introduction quickly to see if I might want to read the whole article or book. Then I go through those readings that seem most useful in more detail. I recommend looking at as wide a variety of sources as you can. As you do so, be sure to take good notes (including accurate citations) so that you can locate the sources again as needed. There's nothing more frustrating than knowing that you had the perfect source but being unable to use it because you can't find it again.

Every library is different. Some have subscriptions to many journals and excellent on-line searching capabilities; others don't. Each library has its own special way of providing access to the materials. Some libraries have on-line search services, like EBSCOhost or Infotrac, which will deliver whole articles to you on-line. Others have a large selection of books and journals in print that you can browse through. Your librarian or professor will be the best person to help you search in your own library.

Most libraries will have access to Sociological Abstracts, either in print or on-line. One of the most important databases for sociologists, Sociological Abstracts summarizes the articles in the most important journals that sociologists publish in. By searching this index, you should be able to get a good idea of what others have said about your topic. Depending on your

field and topic, you may also want to search databases such as Psychological Abstracts, ERIC, or Criminal Justice Abstracts. Again, I strongly recommend that you check with your professor or librarian to see what resources on your campus might be helpful for you.

Although this book can't help you search your specific library, it can give you some general tips on conducting a useful library search:

1. Try a number of different terms for the same thing. Different databases will often use somewhat different key words, and the same database may yield very different articles if you use just slightly different search terms.
2. If the term you've searched yields too many citations to look through, try narrowing it down. For example, I recently used the on-line version of Sociological Abstracts to search the term "working women." When I did so, I received 3669 "hits"—clearly, too many to look through. When I narrowed the topic to "working women and sexual harassment," I received 49 citations—still a lot to look through, but a much more manageable number.
3. Try a number of different sources, including the book catalogue, the journals (also called serials), and the Internet. Different sources will tend to give you very different kinds of results.
4. Once you've found a useful article or book, see if you can track down some of the sources the author used. They are often helpful.
5. Ask a librarian for help, especially if you're finding very little information about what you think should be a popular topic. But be sure you've already thought about some potential angles for your project. The librarian can't create a research topic for you, but she or he can help you find the right resources, given a specific topic.

EVALUATING WEB SITES

The Internet can provide a wealth of material for research projects. You can get information from a variety of government and private sources, as well as research reports, book reviews, and other useful texts. Many government agencies have Web sites, including the Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the FBI. However, the Internet can also lead you astray. A friend of mine says that the World Wide Web is like a huge catalogue—everyone wants to sell you something. Thus, you need to evaluate Web sites

carefully before relying on them in your research. Here are a few questions to ask in judging the usefulness of various sites:

- ◆ Who sponsored the site? Is it maintained by a commercial enterprise or individuals who stand to gain something? Does it contain advertising? Is it maintained by a government agency or university or research institution? Or is it maintained by an individual? If so, what qualifications does the person have? Is she or he an expert in the field, or someone who is mainly trying to express a personal point of view?
- ◆ Does the site seem obviously biased? Does it use obviously inflammatory language? Is it published by a political or social organization with a particular agenda? Does it have a mission statement or statement of purpose anywhere on the site? What kinds of sites is it linked to?
- ◆ How often is the site updated? If it was published several years ago and hasn't been updated since, it probably is not a particularly reliable source.

As you continue to develop and refine your research project, you will probably need to return to the library a number of times. As your research changes, so will the literature that you find useful. But these tips at least will get you started.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS IN REVIEW

Developing a good research project is an ongoing process. There are a number of steps you need to take when embarking on a research project. Although the steps are listed in one order here, you will probably find that you need to go back and forth between the steps as your research unfolds. You should also realize that your project may shift its focus as you learn more and gather more evidence about your topic. At each of these stages, try to remain open to alternative paths.

1. Choose a general topic and try to refine it into a research question.
2. Evaluate whether your topic is interesting, feasible, and worth doing—and ethical. Chapter 3 discusses ethical issues that may arise in research.

3. Develop a research strategy. Decide on the kinds of data you will collect, and think about how you will try to analyze or make sense of them. Make sure that the strategy is consistent with the research question you pose and the research tradition you are working within.
4. Begin your search of the literature. Although you will probably need to return to the literature at other stages in the research process, you should begin with a good sense of what others who have studied the same topic have found.
5. Begin collecting and organizing your data. Chapters 4–7 examine different methods of collecting data, including observation, interviews, textual analysis, and action research.
6. Begin analyzing (or interpreting) your data. Although qualitative researchers usually move back and forth between analyzing and collecting data, it is sometimes helpful to think of the two as separate steps, at least initially. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss strategies for interpreting data.
7. Write up your research. In qualitative research, it can sometimes seem as if you are writing all the time. Certainly, the process of organizing data entails writing, as does interpretation. Qualitative researchers present their work in many venues: as journal articles or books, as presentations at professional conferences, at training sessions or in-service meetings for professionals, and as presentations for community groups. Chapter 10 focuses on strategies for writing up your research and presenting it to a larger community.

QUESTION FOR THOUGHT

Now is the time to consider where *you* stand in relation to your research question. Think back to the research traditions, or paradigms, outlined in Chapter 1. Which one(s) seem most convincing to you? Do you think researchers should take a critical position? Or does a more traditional orientation appeal to you? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches? What personal insights do you have into your proposed research topic? What kinds of special knowledge might you have by virtue of your own life experiences? How might these insights shape the kinds of research you might do?

EXERCISES

1. As you go about your daily routine, try to pay particular attention to your surroundings. See if you can develop at least two research questions sparked by what you encounter in your daily life.
2. Evaluate one of your research questions in terms of whether it is interesting, feasible, and worth doing. Consider what kinds of resources you would need to complete the research.
3. Think of a general research topic that you might find interesting. Can you come up with three or four different perspectives on it? Try refining the topic into several different research questions.
4. Go to the library to see what information you can find about the research questions you developed. Locate at least five books or journal articles that you think might be useful.
5. Search the Internet to find at least two different Web sites of interest to you. Evaluate each Web site you've chosen in terms of its potential usefulness or bias.
6. Use several different research strategies to locate information about your topic. Try several different search engines on the Internet, such as Yahoo or Excite, and several academic databases, such as the card catalogue and Sociological Abstracts. (Check with your professor or librarian about the best methods for searching on your campus.) What different kinds of materials do you find using each strategy?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Creswell, John W. *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994. A good introduction to research design, especially for those interested in comparing qualitative and quantitative approaches.
- Glassner, Barry, and Rosanna Hertz (eds.). *Qualitative Sociology as Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1999. A collection of essays by qualitative scholars that examine the linkages between sociological research and everyday life.
- Lareau, Annette, and Jeffrey Shultz (eds.). *Journeys Through Ethnography: Realistic Accounts of Fieldwork*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996. A collection of researchers' accounts of doing qualitative research.
- LeCompte, Margaret D., and Jean J. Schensul. *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999. Part of the Ethnographer's Toolkit, a seven-book guide to conducting ethnographic research.