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Using Qualitative Methods to Study Commonalities

Introduction

In some respects, qualitative research does not seem as scientific as other kinds of social research. Usually when we think of social science we think of sweeping statements like: "People with more education tend to get better jobs." "Poor countries tend to have more social conflict and political instability than rich countries." These statements offer "big-picture" views that say nothing about individual cases. In these big-picture views, a single statistic or percentage can summarize a vast amount of information about countless cases.

But a lot may be missed in the big picture. Often, researchers do not want these broad views of social phenomena because they believe that a proper understanding can be achieved only through *in-depth* examination of specific cases. Indeed, qualitative researchers often initiate research with a conviction that big-picture representations seriously misrepresent or fail to represent important social phenomena.

Consider the researcher who wants to understand the fascination that some people have with guns—for example, gun collectors, some military personnel, hunters, and other enthusiasts. A big-picture view might show that certain categories of people (for example, lower middle-class white males) are more likely to collect guns and subscribe to magazines devoted to guns (Stinchcombe et al. 1980 study this question). But does the big-picture view really say very much about the fascination with guns? What's the best way to study and understand this fascination?

A lot can be learned simply by talking to gun enthusiasts. They can be located in gun shops, gun clubs, and at practice ranges. The researcher in this case might try to get to know as many as feasible and interview them in depth. How did they get started with guns? How many guns do they own? How often do they shoot them? How do they feel when they are using them? How do they feel when they don't have easy access to a gun? How many of their friends are gun enthusiasts? Do they feel that law enforcement agencies are effective? What do they think about capital

punishment? What political organizations, if any, do they belong to? How do they vote?

From these interviews it would be possible to build an image of at least one major type of gun enthusiast, to craft a composite image based on interviews of many individuals. This composite image could be fleshed out further by studying the magazines and other literature that the interviewees read and by observing what goes on at social gatherings of gun enthusiasts. The key would be to achieve as much in-depth knowledge as possible and look for common patterns among gun enthusiasts and their social worlds.

Sometimes the emphasis of the qualitative approach on in-depth knowledge means the researcher examines only a single case (for example, the life history of a single individual or the history of a single organization). Knowing as much as possible about one case is not easy because every case potentially offers information that is infinite in its detail. Much of this information is not useful because it is redundant or irrelevant, given the researcher's questions and purposes. In the qualitative approach, researchers must determine which information is useful in the course of the investigation, and they become more selective as additional knowledge about each case is gained. In the course of learning more about the research subject, the investigator sharpens his or her understanding of the case by refining and elaborating "images" of the research subject and relating these to analytic frames (see Chapter 3). These emerging images serve to structure further inquiry by marking some data collection paths as promising and others as dead ends.

Qualitative research often involves a process of *reciprocal clarification* of the researcher's image of the research subject, on the one hand, and the concepts that frame the investigation, on the other. Images are built up from cases, sometimes by looking for similarities among several examples of the phenomenon that seem to be in the same general category. These images, in turn, can be related to concepts. A concept is a general idea that may apply to many specific instances. Concepts offer abstract summaries of the properties shared by the members of a category of social phenomena. They are the key components of analytic frames, which, in turn are derived from ideas—current theoretical thinking about social life (see Chapter 3).

Consider a simple example first mentioned in Chapter 1: "Emotion work" is a concept developed by Arlie Hochschild (1983) to describe the conscious manipulation of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display. This concept, in effect, summarizes a lot of what flight attendants do because they often have to create certain appearances for passengers. Her study of flight attendants thus involved a mutual clarification of the *category* "the work of flight attendants" and the *concept* of "emotion-work." She refined the image of the flight attendant (an empirical category) as she clarified the concept of emotion work. This process of reciprocal clarification is ongoing and culminates in the representation of the research that the investigator offers at the conclusion of the study. The newly refined concepts—those that were elaborated in the course of the study—are featured in the representation of the results of qualitative research.

The Goals of Qualitative Research

Because of its emphases on in-depth knowledge and on the refinement and elaboration of images and concepts, qualitative research is especially appropriate for several of the central goals of social research. These include giving voice, interpreting historical or cultural significance, and advancing theory.

Giving Voice

There are many groups in society, called marginalized groups by social scientists, who are outside of society's mainstream, for example—the poor, sexual minorities, racial and ethnic minorities, immigrant groups, and so on. Often, these groups lack voice in society. Their views are rarely heard by mainstream audiences because they are rarely published or carried by the media. In fact, their lives are often misrepresented—if they are represented at all.

Techniques that help uncover subtle aspects and features of these groups can go a long way toward helping researchers construct better representations of their experiences. By emphasizing close, in-depth empirical study, the qualitative approach is well suited for the difficult task of representing groups that escape the grasp of other approaches.

Interpreting Historically or Culturally Significant Phenomena

How we think about an important event or historic episode affects how we understand ourselves as a society or as a nation. For example, in the middle to late 1800s the United States was involved in a series of territorial struggles with Mexico. These struggles can be interpreted as part of the inevitable westward expansion of European-Americans across a vast,

sparsely populated continent. Or perhaps they can be seen as part of a pattern of unjust bullying of a generally peaceful neighbor. As the United States gains an ever larger Hispanic population, a revision of our understanding of these territorial struggles may help us adjust our view of the diverse collection of people who make up American society.

Methods that help us see things in new ways facilitate this goal of interpreting and reinterpreting significant historical events. Of course, if the evidence does not strongly support a new image, or offers better support to existing images, then new ways of understanding past events will not gain wide acceptance. The important point is that the qualitative approach mandates close attention to historical detail in the effort to construct new understandings of culturally or historically significant phenomena.

Advancing Theory

There are many ways to advance theory. New information about a broad pattern that holds across many cases (for example, a strong correlation; see Chapter 6) can stimulate new theoretical thinking. However, in-depth knowledge—the kind that comes from case studies—provides especially rich raw material for advancing theoretical ideas. When much is known about a case, it is easier to see how the different parts or aspects of a case fit together.

For instance, it is difficult to know how the structure of a nun's daily routines of prayer, work, and community life help her maintain her deep religious commitments without collecting detailed observations of the lives of nuns. This in-depth knowledge is useful for elaborating concepts such as "commitment" and for direct examination of the connections among the phenomena that the researcher believes illustrate and elaborate the concept, for example—the daily routines of those with strong commitments.

The value of qualitative research for advancing theory also follows directly from practical aspects of this type of research. It is impossible to decide which bits of evidence about a case are relevant without clarifying the concepts and ideas that frame the investigation. The initial goal of knowing as much as possible about a case eventually gives way to an attempt to identify the features of the case that seem most significant to the researcher and his or her questions. This shift requires an elaboration and refinement of the concepts that initially prompted the study or the development of new concepts. Researchers cannot forever remain open to all the information that their cases offer. If they do, they are quickly

overwhelmed by a mass of indecipherable and sometimes contradictory evidence.

Finally, qualitative research also advances theory in its emphasis on the commonalities that exist across cases. In some studies cases may be selected that at first glance may seem very different. Identifying commonalities across diverse cases requires that the investigator look at the cases in a different way and perhaps discover new things about them. Diane Vaughan's study *Uncoupling* (1986), for example, focused not only on the breakup of conventional relationships—heterosexual marriages—but also on the breakup of homosexual relationships. Despite profound differences in the sexual orientations of her subjects, Vaughan found striking similarities in the process of "uncoupling" across these different kinds of relationships. By looking for similarities in unexpected places, social researchers develop new insights that advance theoretical thinking.

The Process of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is often less structured than other kinds of social research. The investigator initiates a study with a certain degree of openness to the research subject and what may be learned from it. Qualitative researchers rarely test theories. Instead, they usually seek to use one or more cases or categories of cases to develop ideas. The qualitative researcher starts out by selecting relevant research sites and cases, then identifies "sensitizing concepts," clarifies major concepts and empirical categories in the course of the investigation, and may end the project by elaborating one or more analytic frames.

Selecting Sites and Cases

Qualitative research is strongly shaped by the choice of research subjects and sites. When the goal of the research is to give voice, a specific group is chosen for study. When the goal is to assess historical or cultural significance, a specific set of events or other slice of social life is selected. When the goal is to advance theory, a case may be chosen because it is unusual in some way and thus presents a special opportunity for the elaboration of new ideas.

Sometimes, however, cases are chosen not because they are special or unusual or significant in some way, but because they are typical or undistinguished. A researcher interested in medical schools in general, for example, might select a school that is typical or average, not the best

medical school in the country or the worst (see Becker et al. 1961). To select a school at either extreme might limit the value of the study for drawing conclusions about medical schools in general. In short, because qualitative researchers often work with a small number of cases, they are sometimes very concerned to establish the *representativeness* of the cases they study (see Chapter 1).

In-depth knowledge is sometimes achieved through the study of a single case. Often, however, it is best achieved by studying several instances of the same thing because different aspects may be more visible in different cases. Consider a study of a neighborhood with many new immigrants. The researcher might find that in this neighborhood the cultivation of interpersonal networks (that is, making connections with lots of different people) is the key to the successful adjustment of immigrants to the United States. Much can be learned from studying one such neighborhood in depth. In fact, it is only through in-depth study that immigrants' use of interpersonal networks could be thoroughly documented. However, the study could be deepened further through the study of several immigrant neighborhoods. There may be various ways of establishing a reliable interpersonal network, depending on the cultural backgrounds of the immigrants. Different ways of establishing interpersonal networks might be more apparent in other neighborhoods.

When qualitative researchers collect data on many instances of the phenomenon under study, they focus on what the different instances have in common. Examining multiple instances of the same thing (for example, interviewing thirty-five flight attendants) makes it possible to deepen and enrich a representation (for example, a representation of the emotion work required in service jobs). A study of environmental activists might focus on the life experiences they share. A study of Catholic priests might focus on how they maintain their religious commitments. A study of immigrant neighborhoods might focus on the different ways of establishing and using interpersonal networks to facilitate immigrants' adjustment to their new surroundings.

When many instances of the same thing are studied, researchers may keep adding instances until the investigation reaches a point of **saturation.** The researcher stops learning new things about the case and recently collected evidence appears repetitious or redundant with previously collected evidence. It is impossible to tell beforehand how many instances the researcher will have to examine before the point of saturation is reached. In general, if the researcher learns as much as possible about the research subject, he or she will be a good judge of when this point has been reached.

Of course, if the cases selected for study are not sufficiently representative of the category the qualitative researcher hopes to address, then the point of saturation may be reached prematurely. A study that seeks to represent the work of taxi drivers in New York City may reach saturation (no new things are being learned) after the researcher interviews ten taxi drivers who are recent immigrants from Romania. However, these ten Romanian taxi drivers are probably not representative of all New York taxi drivers. The researcher should seek out taxi drivers with different backgrounds.

Even when qualitative researchers study many instances of the same thing (as when fifty priests are interviewed, for example), they often describe the case as singular ("the *case* of Catholic priests") because the focus is on commonalities—features that the instances share. By contrast, a quantitative researcher (see Chapter 6) interested in systematic differences (say, the covariation between age and strength of religious commitments among these same priests) would emphasize the fact that the research summarizes information on *many* cases (fifty priests). Statements about patterns of covariation (for example, "older priests appear to be more committed than younger priests") are more likely to be accepted if they are based on as many cases as possible.

This distinction is subtle but very important. The qualitative researcher who interviews fifty priests seeks to construct a full portrait of "the priest" and how priests maintain their deep religious commitments. It may be that the images that emerged changed very little, if at all, after the tenth priest was interviewed, and not much was learned from the remaining forty priests. The difference between ten and fifty is not important; what matters is the soundness of the portrayal of *this* case (the Catholic priest). If a study is done properly and is based on a sufficient number of interviews, it can be used for comparison with other cases (for example, comparing priests with the ministers of a Protestant denomination). The important point is that even though many examples of the same thing may be examined, research that emphasizes similarities seeks to construct a single, composite portrait of the case.

Use of Sensitizing Concepts

It is impossible to initiate a qualitative study without some sense of why the subject is worth studying and what concepts might be used to guide the investigation. These concepts are often drawn from half-formed, tentative analytic frames, which typically reflect current theoretical ideas. These initial, *sensitizing concepts* get the research started, but they do not

straitjacket the research. The researcher expects that these initial concepts, at a minimum, will be altered significantly or even discarded in the course of the research.

A researcher studying hospital patients may bring "social class" as a sensitizing concept to the research and expect to find that patients from families with more income receive better care. However, the concept of social class, as expressed in family income, might prove to be too limiting as a frame for the research and be supplanted by an emphasis on some other aspect of family social status, such as occupational prestige of the head of the household. Sometimes concepts that seem important or useful early in the study prove to be dead ends, and they are discarded and replaced by new concepts drawn from different frames. Armed with these new concepts, the researcher may decide that some of the evidence that earlier seemed irrelevant needs to be reexamined.

For example, John Walton (1991, 1992) studied the conflict over water rights in Owens Valley, California, a struggle that pitted the residents of Owens Valley against water-hungry Los Angeles. (This struggle provided the background for the movie *Chinatown*, starring Jack Nicholson.) The battle over water rights dragged on for decades and generated so much mass protest and collective violence that it became known as "California's dirty little civil war." At first, Walton tried to use concepts that centered on social class and class conflict to understand this struggle. These were his initial, sensitizing concepts. He found that these concepts did not help him make sense of the evidence that he collected, nor did they direct him down data collection paths that advanced the study. Eventually he came to understand the struggle more in terms of collective responses anchored in local conditions to changing governmental structures, especially the growing influence and power of the federal government. These new concepts directed him to important historical evidence that he might have overlooked otherwise.

Clarifying Concepts and Categories

Qualitative research clarifies concepts (the key components of analytic frames) and empirical categories (which group similar instances of social phenomena) in a reciprocal manner. These two activities, categorizing and conceptualizing, go hand in hand because concepts define categories and the members of a category exemplify or illustrate the concepts that unite them into a category.

Generally, the members of a category are expected to be relatively homogeneous with respect to the concepts they exemplify. If a researcher

found that only some flight attendants engage in emotion work, then it would be wrong to use the concept to characterize flight attendants. Suppose a researcher studying flight attendants found that only those flight attendants hired after a specific point in time engage in a lot of emotion work. It might be possible to trace this to a change in the training of flight attendants and perhaps to a conscious attempt by management to alter how flight attendants interact with passengers. The lack of fit between the concept "emotion work" and the broad category "all flight attendants" in this event would enrich the study, making it possible to narrow the relevant category to a subset of flight attendants—those subjected to a specific kind of training—and showing a direct connection to management intervention.

This example shows the importance of examining the members of a category to make sure that they all display the concepts they are thought to exemplify. Researchers develop concepts from the images that emerge from the categories of phenomena they examine. They then test the limits of the concepts they develop by closely examining the members of relevant categories. In the example just presented, the concept of emotion work emerged from images of flight attendants constructed by the investigator. Subsequent examination of all flight attendants—to see if they all engage in emotion work—would establish the limits of the relevant category.

Consider a second example of the interaction of categories and concepts, Howard Becker's (1953) early study of becoming a marijuana user. Becker studied several marijuana users and found that each went through a process of *learning* to become a user—of learning *how* to enjoy marijuana. This led him to speculate that all *marijuana users* (the category) go through a *social process of learning* (the concept) to enjoy marijuana. He elaborated the key steps in the process of becoming a user by interviewing more than fifty users in the Chicago area in the early 1950s. He found that most, more or less, went through the same process of learning how to enjoy marijuana.

However, Becker did encounter a few users who did not go through this process, and, although they were users, they said that they did not enjoy the drug. Becker described them as people who used marijuana for the sake of appearance—in order to appear to be a certain kind of person or to "fit in" with the people around them. Did this invalidate the idea that all users go through the same learning process? Becker solved the problem by narrowing the relevant category. He argued that the social process of learning how to enjoy marijuana applied only to those who used marijuana for pleasure, a category that embraced most, but not all,

users. This narrowing made it possible for him to establish a closer correspondence between category (those who use marijuana for pleasure) and concept (the social process of learning how to use marijuana).

These examples show that the core issue in the clarification and elaboration of categories and concepts is the assessment of the degree to which the members of a category exemplify the relevant concept. Are the same elements present in each instance in more or less the same way? When encountering contradictory evidence (for example, flight attendants who don't do emotion work or marijuana users who did not go through the social process of learning how to enjoy marijuana), researchers have two choices. They can discard the concept they were developing and try to develop new ones—concepts that do a better job of uniting the members of the category. Or they can narrow the category of phenomena relevant to their concept and try to achieve a better fit with the concept.

Elaborating Analytic Frames

Because categories and concepts are clarified in the course of qualitative research, the researcher may not be certain what the research subject is a "case of" until all the evidence is collected and studied. Deciding that the research subject is a case of something and then representing it that way is often the very last phase of qualitative research.

The open character of qualitative research can be seen clearly in the role played by analytic frames in this strategy. In some research strategies (for example, quantitative research; see Chapter 6), the main purpose of the analytic frame is to express the theory to be tested in terms of the relevant cases and variables. In qualitative research, by contrast, there is often only a tentative, vaguely formulated analytic frame at the outset because it is developed in the course of the research.

As more is learned about the cases and as categories and concepts are clarified, the researcher can address basic questions: What is this case a case of? What are its relevant features? What makes the chosen research subject or site valuable, interesting, or significant? As qualitative researchers elaborate analytic frames, they also deepen their understanding of their cases. To describe the work of flight attendants as a case of emotion work (Hochschild 1983) suggests that there are other jobs that also require emotion work (for example, tour guides, camp counselors, waitresses, and so on) and that the emotion-work frame developed in the study of flight attendants may be applied to these other people-oriented service occupations.

Not all qualitative researchers develop analytic frames. Sometimes they leave this task to other researchers studying related cases. The development of analytic frames is challenging because it requires the extension of the concepts elaborated in one case to other cases. Many qualitative researchers are content to report detailed treatments of the cases they study and leave their analytic frames implicit and unstated. They feel that their cases speak well enough for themselves.

This unwillingness to generalize is found in all types of qualitative research, from observations of small groups to historical interpretations of the international system. For this reason, qualitative researchers are often accused of being "merely descriptive" and not "scientific" in their research. As should be clear by now, however, the process of representing research subjects is heavily dependent on the interaction between concepts and images, regardless of whether this interaction is made explicit by researchers when they represent their subjects. Without concepts, it is impossible to select evidence, arrange facts, or make sense of the infinite amount of information that can be gleaned from a single case. Like other forms of social research, qualitative research culminates in theoretically structured representations of social life—representations that reflect the regimen of social research.

Using Qualitative Methods

There are many textbooks on qualitative methods, and they describe qualitative methods in a variety of ways (see for example Denzin 1970, 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967; McCall and Simmons 1969; Strauss 1987; Schwartz and Jacobs 1979). In part, this diversity of views follows from the emphasis on *in-depth* investigation and the fact that there are many different ways to achieve in-depth knowledge. In sociology, anthropology, and most other social sciences, qualitative methods are often identified with participant observation, in-depth interviewing, fieldwork, and ethnographic study. These methods emphasize the immersion of the researcher in a research setting and the effort to uncover the meaning and significance of social phenomena for people in those settings. These techniques are best for studying social situations at the level of person-to-person interaction.

For an anthropologist, this immersion might involve living in some isolated village in some faraway part of the world. Consider, for example Margaret Mead's work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1961). For a sociologist, immersion might involve long periods of observing and talking to people

in one setting, such as Erving Goffman's research on the staff and patients of a mental institution, reported in his classic study *Asylums* (1961). In both examples, the organizing principle of the research is the idea that the kind of in-depth knowledge needed for a proper representation of the research subject must be based on the perspectives of the people being studied—that their lives and their worlds must be understood "through their eyes." In short, the emphasis is on immersion and empirical intimacy (Truzzi 1974).

The goal of this presentation of qualitative methods, however, is to address procedures that are relevant to all types of qualitative research, not simply the work of those who seek to represent social life and as it appears through the eyes of participants. Researchers who seek to represent historically significant events, for example, cannot hope to see these events through the eyes of the participants if these events occurred in the distant past (the French Revolution, for example, or slavery in the U.S. South). Still, these historical researchers, like others who use qualitative methods, value and seek in-depth knowledge about cases, and they attempt to piece together meaningful images from evidence, with the help of concepts and analytic frames.

The key features common to all qualitative methods can be seen when they are contrasted with quantitative methods. Most quantitative data techniques are *data condensers*. They condense data in order to reveal the big picture. For example, calculating the percentage of unionized workers who vote for the Democratic party condenses information on thousands of individuals into a single number showing the link between these two attributes (union membership and party preference). Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as *data enhancers*. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly, depending on how it is done.

In many ways, data enhancement is like photographic enhancement. When a photograph is enhanced, it is possible to see certain aspects of the photographer's subject more clearly. When qualitative methods are used to enhance social data, researchers see things about their subjects that they might miss otherwise. Data enhancement is the key to in-depth knowledge.

Almost all qualitative research seeks to construct representations based on in-depth, detailed knowledge of cases, often to correct misrepresentations or to offer new representations of the research subject. Thus, qualitative researchers share an interest in procedures that clarify key aspects of research subjects—procedures that make it possible to see aspects of cases that might otherwise be missed. While there are many such

procedures, two that are common to most qualitative work are emphasized here: analytic induction and theoretical sampling. Both techniques are data enhancers.

Analytic Induction

Analytic induction means very different things to different researchers. Originally, it had a very strict meaning and was identified with the search for "universals" in social life (Lindesmith 1947; Cressey 1953; Turner 1953; Robinson 1951). Universals are properties that are invariant. If all upper middle-class white males over the age of fifty in the United States voted for the Republican party, then this would constitute a "universal." If only one person in this category voted for some other party, then the pattern would not be universal and thus would not qualify as a finding, according to a very strict, very simple-minded application of the method of analytic induction. Today, however, analytic induction is often used to refer to any systematic examination of similarities that seeks to develop concepts or ideas.

Rather than seeing analytic induction as a search for universals, a search that is likely to fail, it is better to see it as a research strategy that directs investigators to pay close attention to evidence that challenges or disconfirms whatever images they are developing. As researchers accumulate evidence, they compare incidents or cases that appear to be in the same general category with each other. These comparisons establish similarities and differences among incidents and thus help to define categories and concepts. (Sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss call this process the **constant comparative method**.) Evidence that challenges or refutes images that the researcher is constructing from evidence provides important clues for how to alter concepts or shift categories.

A study in a hospital might examine the care given to dying patients. By comparing cases of this type, the researcher can identify common features and the major dimensions of variation among incidents. Based on hours of observing the care of dying patients, a researcher might find:

1. that nurses and other hospital personnel implicitly evaluate the potential "social loss" represented by each patient if the patient were to die
2. that a small number of patient characteristics enter into this evaluation (for example, the age and education of the patient)
3. that the quality of patient care depends on the potential social loss inferred by the hospital personnel

Incidents that challenge either the generality of the evaluation of the social loss of dying patients or the impact of this evaluation on the care patients receive would be especially important for refining these ideas. In the next phase of the research, the investigator might seek out disconfirming evidence (for example, a patient who is judged to be not much of a "social loss" but nevertheless receives excellent care) to test these initial images and see how they need to be revised or limited. If, for example, the researcher found that hospital personnel ignored the social loss represented by accident victims, then he or she would be forced either to reformulate the image to accommodate accident victims or else limit its applicability to nonaccident patients.

In effect, the method of analytic induction is used both to construct images and to seek out contrary evidence because it sees such evidence as the best raw material for improving initial images. As a data procedure, this technique is less concerned with how much positive evidence has been accumulated (for example, how many cases corroborate the image the researcher is developing), and more with the degree to which the image of the research subject has been refined, sharpened, and elaborated in response to both confirming and disconfirming evidence.

Analytic induction facilitates the reciprocal clarification of concepts and categories, a key feature of qualitative research. When Howard Becker narrowed his category from "all marijuana users" to "those who use marijuana for pleasure," he used the technique of analytic induction. Essentially, the technique involves looking for relevant similarities among the instances of a category, and then linking these to refine an image (for example, the image of how one becomes a marijuana user). If relevant similarities cannot be identified, then either the category is too wide and heterogeneous and should be narrowed, or else the researcher needs to take another look at the evidence and reconceptualize possible similarities. Negative cases are especially important because they are either excluded when the relevant category is narrowed, or they are the main focus when the investigator attempts to reconceptualize commonalities and thereby reconcile contradictory evidence.

Consider a more detailed example: Jack Katz (1982) studied legal assistance lawyers—those who help poor people. He found that many legal assistance lawyers burn out quickly—in less than two years—and abandon this kind of work, often for more lucrative legal careers. Katz wanted to understand why by studying those who stayed with legal assistance work despite its drawbacks. He assembled evidence on the legal assistance lawyers in the group he studied and checked out several of

his initial ideas by comparing those who had quit before two years of service with those who had stayed on for more than two years.

One of the first ideas Katz examined was based on his initial impressions of these attorneys. He speculated that legal assistance lawyers who were former political activists did not burn out like the others. A systematic examination of the evidence on many lawyers provided some support for this speculation. However, the fit was far from perfect. There were some who stayed with legal assistance work who were not former political activists, and there were former political activists who left legal assistance work before two years had elapsed.

Katz examined these negative cases closely and found some problems with his initial formulation. Some former activists left for obvious reasons. They were offered positions that were clearly a step up, careerwise. Some who were not former activists stayed because they lacked alternatives—they couldn't get better jobs as lawyers—or because they had positions in the organization that they liked (such as administrative positions).

It was clear to Katz that his categories "staying versus leaving" had to be refined and that his search for adequate explanatory concepts was far from over. First, he narrowed the category that interested him most—those who stayed. Clearly he was not interested in all stayers. Some stayers, after all, had interesting work within the legal assistance organization he studied. Rather, he was interested in people who stayed despite being involved in frustrating or limiting work. He restricted his focus to this subset of stayers and searched for relevant similarities within this group.

With this shift he became less interested in all stayers versus all leavers and more interested in differences between categories of stayers—those who stayed despite frustrating work versus other stayers. In short, the focus was on *how* people stayed, and he had straightforward explanations for many stayers (for example, those with interesting work). As it turned out, this tighter category—stayers with frustrating work—also proved to be too broad, and he later narrowed it further to legal assistance lawyers who were involved in low-status work. After all, some lawyers doing significant work, he discovered, were nevertheless frustrated with their work.

The search for explanatory factors became more focused as the main category of interest narrowed. After rejecting "activist background" as an explanation for staying, Katz tried to distinguish lawyers who were more oriented toward using the legal system for reform from those who

were less so. He also looked at the participation of lawyers in social activities that celebrated reform work (for example, progressive political groups). This search for important commonalities among stayers went hand in hand with narrowing the relevant category of stayers from all stayers to those who were involved in low-status work.

The process of narrowing and refining is depicted in Table 4.1, which shows the process of analytic induction in tabular form based on Jack Katz's description. The table reports hypothetical information on thirty lawyers to illustrate the general process he describes, not his specific conclusions. The first three columns show the narrowing of the category of stayers, from all stayers (column 1; 18 out of 30 lawyers) to stayers with frustrating work (column 2; 13 out of 30 lawyers), to stayers involved in work that carried low status (column 3; 10 out of 30 lawyers). Columns 4 through 6 show the various ways Katz tried to explain staying—his various images of the "stayer." As his focus shifted from column 1 to column 2 and then to column 3, he became more interested in how and why people stayed and less in the difference between stayers and the twelve leavers at the bottom of the table. In other words, he came to view staying as an accomplishment for those doing low-status work and studied how it was accomplished.

First, Katz tried to construct an image of staying as a continuation of a commitment to political activism (column 4). As the hypothetical data in Table 4.1 show, this image fails. Of the eighteen lawyers who stayed more than two years, only seven were former activists, and of the twelve who left the organization, four were former activists. Next, Katz studied his negative cases closely (especially, nonactivists who stayed) and found that his categorization of stayers versus leavers was too crude. He reasoned that what really interested him most was people who stayed despite their involvement in frustrating work. He then tried to find commonalities among this subset of stayers, looking at their reform orientations and their participation in a social life supportive of reform work. The fit was still not close enough. There were some lawyers who did frustrating work, for example, who were not reform oriented.

Examination of negative cases led to a further narrowing of the category—to lawyers involved in low-status work—and further refinement of the image—to participation in a social environment that glorified reform work. These further refinements resulted in a good fit. The data in the table suggest that legal aid lawyers will do low-status work if they participate in a social environment that glorifies the idea that important social reforms can be achieved through the legal system.

TABLE 4.1

Hypothetical Example of Analytic Induction

	Categories			*Explanatory Concepts*		
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
Case	*Stayed More Than Two Years?*	*Works in a Frustrating Place?*	*Involved in Low-Status Work?*	*Activist Background?*	*Reform Oriented?*	*Social Life Supports Reform Orientation?*
1	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
2	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
4	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
7	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
8	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
9	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
10	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes
11	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
12	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
13	yes	yes	no	no	no	no
14	yes	no	no	no	no	no
15	yes	no	no	no	no	no
16	yes	no	no	no	no	no
17	yes	no	no	no	no	no
18	yes	no	no	no	no	no
19	no	no	no	yes	no	no
20	no	no	no	yes	no	no
21	no	no	no	yes	no	no
22	no	no	no	yes	no	no
23	no	no	no	no	no	no
24	no	no	no	no	no	no
25	no	no	no	no	no	no
26	no	no	no	no	no	no
27	no	no	no	no	no	no
28	no	no	no	no	no	no
29	no	no	no	no	no	no
30	no	no	no	no	no	no

Columns 3 and 6 correspond perfectly. In fact, most qualitative researchers are satisfied with less than perfect fit. There is usually at least a handful of extraneous evidence that neither fits nor challenges a particular image. The goal is not perfect fit, per se, but a conceptual refinement that provides a deeper understanding of the research subject. Basically, the greater the effort to account for or understand negative cases or contrary evidence, the deeper the understanding of the research subject. The technique of analytic induction thus facilitates the goal of in-depth knowledge.

Katz comments that analytic induction is poorly labeled because it is not a technique of pure induction. Researchers work back and forth between their ideas and their evidence, trying to achieve what Katz calls a "double fitting" of explanations and observations (that is, ideas and evidence). As discussed in Chapter 3, this process of double fitting is best understood as retroduction, a term that describes the interplay of induction and deduction in the process of scientific discovery.

Theoretical Sampling

Sometimes qualitative researchers conduct investigations of related phenomena in several different settings. Most often this interest in a broader investigation follows from a deliberate strategy of **theoretical sampling**, a term coined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) to describe the process of choosing new research sites or cases to compare with one that has already been studied. For example, a researcher interested in how environmental activists in the United States maintain their political commitments might extend the study to (1) environmental activists in another part of the world (for example, Eastern Europe) or perhaps to (2) another type of activist (for example religious activists in the United States).

This process of theoretical sampling occurs not only in the study of social groups (for example, environmental activists), but also in the study of historical processes and episodes. General questions that arise in a study of the Russian Revolution of 1917 might be addressed by examining the Chinese Revolution of 1949 or the recent Nicaraguan Revolution. There may be questions about the role of peasants in the Russian Revolution that could be answered by examining the Chinese case and comparing it to the Russian case.

The choice of the comparison group (comparing environmental activists in the United States with either environmental activists in Eastern Europe or with people in the United States who maintain radical religious commitments) can vary widely depending on the nature and goals of the investigation. Different comparisons hold different aspects of cases constant. Comparing environmental and religious activists in the United States holds some things constant such as the impact of national setting, but allows the nature of the commitment to vary (environmental versus religious). Comparing environmental activists in the United States with environmental activists in Eastern Europe highlights the impact of the factor that varies most, national setting, but holds the nature of the commitment, environmental, constant.

When a researcher employs a strategy of theoretical sampling, the selection of additional cases is most often determined by questions and issues raised in the first case studied. Selection of new cases is not a matter of convenience; the researcher's sampling strategy evolves as his or her understanding of the research subject and the concepts it exemplifies matures. The goal of theoretical sampling is not to sample in a way that captures all possible variations, rather in one that aids the development of concepts and deepens the understanding of research subjects.

A researcher studying how hospital personnel evaluate the potential social loss of dying patients and link the care they give to these evaluations might believe that this practice is caused by limited resources in the hospital studied. If the hospital had more resources (for example, more nurses), it might be able to provide better and more uniform care to all patients, regardless of their social value. To explore this idea, the researcher might study two additional hospitals, one with more resources and one with fewer resources than the first hospital. If the reasoning based on the first hospital is correct, then the staff of the hospital with more resources should spend less time evaluating the social loss of dying patients and provide more uniform care, while the staff of the hospital with fewer resources should spend more time evaluating social loss and should adjust their care in more strict accordance with these evaluations.

This expansion of the study to two new sites is a straightforward implementation of the idea of theoretical sampling. The selection of the new sites follows directly from ideas developed in the first site and provides an opportunity to confirm and deepen the insights developed in that setting. Of course, if research in these new settings were to contradict expectations based on research in the first hospital, then the researcher would be compelled to develop a different understanding of how and why hospital personnel varied their care of dying patients.

This example of theoretical sampling also shows that it is a technique of **data triangulation** (Denzin 1978). Triangulation is a term that originally described how sailors use stars and simple trigonometry to locate

their position on earth. More generally, triangulation can be understood as a way of using independent pieces of information to get a better fix on something that is only partially known or understood. In the example just presented, the researcher used evidence from two other hospitals, one with more resources and one with fewer, to get a better fix on the first hospital. By comparing the three hospitals, arrayed along a single continuum of resources, the researcher could assess the validity and generality of findings from the first hospital.

Theoretical sampling is also a powerful technique for building analytic frames. Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh (1977) studied ex-nuns—women who left Catholic religious orders—and used this group of women to develop the concept of "role exit," in much the same way that Arlie Hochschild used her study of flight attendants to develop the concept of emotion work. Ebaugh became interested in people whose current self-identities were strongly influenced by the roles they had left behind. This interest led her to develop a deliberate strategy of sampling different kinds of "exs" in addition to ex-nuns: ex-doctors, mother's without custody, transsexuals, and so on. Each group offered evidence on a different type of role exit, the most dramatic being an exit from one sex to another. The end product of Ebaugh's strategy of theoretical sampling was a fully developed analytic frame for role exit (Ebaugh 1988).

Howard Becker (1963) studied a variety of groups classified as "deviant" in addition to marijuana users. He joined these different cases together in a single analytic frame and called all these groups "outsiders." His frame emphasized a dual process of *social learning* (people learn "deviant" behaviors from others in social settings) and *labeling* (society's tendency to label some groups deviant furthers their isolation from the larger society). His work challenged conventional thinking that certain types of people were at a greater risk of becoming deviant and focused subsequent research on social processes. In a similar manner, Erving Goffman (1963) studied a wide variety of stigmatized people, from those with physical handicaps to homosexuals. From a consideration of many different types, he developed a powerful analytic frame for understanding how stigmatized individuals deal with their discredited identities.

While the strategy of theoretical sampling is an excellent device for gaining a deeper understanding of cases and for advancing theory (one of the main goals of social research), many qualitative researchers consider the representation of even a single case sufficient for their goals. Some consider the addition of new cases—using the strategy of theoretical sampling—to be a useless detour from the important task of understanding one case well. They are content to leave the comparison of cases and the development of broad analytic frames to researchers more interested in general questions.

While this reluctance to broaden an investigation is common among qualitative researchers, the strategy of theoretical sampling offers a powerful research tool. As Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue, theoretical sampling offers the opportunity to construct generalizations and to deepen understanding of research subjects at the same time.

The Study of a Single Case

The techniques of analytic induction and theoretical sampling work best when there are multiple instances of the phenomenon the researcher is studying. The study of the care of dying patients, for instance, involves observing how patients are treated. Each patient provides another instance to examine. What techniques can researchers use when they study only a single instance—for example, one person's life or a single historical event? While it is true that most data procedures are designed for multiple instances, the study of a single case is not haphazard and unstructured (Feagin et al. 1991). In fact, the single-case study is structured in ways that parallel analytic induction.

For illustration, consider a researcher who seeks to evaluate the historical significance of the resignation of President Richard Nixon, who left office in the middle of his second term. Suppose the goal of the researcher in this investigation is to try to interpret this episode as a serious blow to the authority of the U.S. government, at least in the eyes of the American people. Because of what transpired, according to this interpretation, the American people could never again see their politicians as statesmen or trust government leaders and officials to tell them the truth.

Of course, there are many different ways to interpret each historical episode, and each interpretation is anchored in a different analytic frame. The researcher's interpretation sees the events surrounding the resignation of President Nixon in terms of the authority and legitimacy of governments. What kinds of conditions and events enhance a government's authority? What kinds undermine its authority?

In order to evaluate this interpretation, the researcher would have to assemble facts relevant to the analytic frame (which emphasizes factors influencing a government's authority) and see if they can be assembled into an image that supports this interpretation. Of course, there are many facts, and not all will necessarily be consistent with the initial interpretation. The key question is: among the relevant facts, which are consistent

and which are not? Analytic frames play an important part in this process because they define some facts as relevant and others as irrelevant, and different frames define different sets of facts as relevant.

In many ways, this evaluation of facts is like analytic induction. In analytic induction the goal is to see if all the relevant instances are the same with respect to some cause or characteristic, as in Jack Katz's research on legal assistance attorneys. In the study of a single case, the problem is to see if all the facts that are relevant in some way to the suggested frame agree with or support an interpretation. Thus, the different facts in the study of a single case are like the different instances in analytic induction.

Often the facts relevant to a particular frame, once assembled, do not provide strong support for the initial interpretation. As in analytic induction, the interpretation and the facts are "double fitted." That is, there is an interplay between the researcher's interpretation and the facts, an interaction that moves either toward some sort of fit or toward a stalemate. As in the study of many instances (for example, the care of many different patients in a hospital), the interplay between evidence-based images and theoretical ideas expressed through analytic frames leads to a progressive refinement of both.

It is important to remember that each different interpretation is anchored in a different frame. Thus, the facts relevant to one frame will not overlap perfectly with the facts relevant to another. Thus, there can be many different ways to frame a single case, and each interpretation may be valid because of this imperfect overlap. Cases that can be interpreted in a variety of different ways are considered "rich" because they help researchers explore the interconnection of the ideas expressed through different frames.

Conclusion

Researchers use qualitative methods when they believe that the best way to construct a proper representation is through in-depth study of phenomena. Often they address phenomena that they believe have been seriously misrepresented, sometimes by social researchers using other approaches, or perhaps not represented at all. This in-depth investigation often focuses on a primary case, on the commonalities among separate instances of the same phenomenon, or on parallel phenomena identified through a deliberate strategy of theoretical sampling.

Qualitative methods are holistic, meaning that aspects of cases are viewed in the context of the whole case, and researchers often must triangulate information about a number of cases in order to make sense of one case. Qualitative methods are used to uncover essential features of a case and then illuminate key relationships among these features. Often, a qualitative researcher will argue that his or her cases *exemplify* one or more key theoretical processes or categories. Finally, as qualitative research progresses, there is a reciprocal clarification of the underlying character of the phenomena under investigation and the theoretical concepts that they are believed to exemplify.