Primary Data Collection Methods

Qualitative researchers typically rely on four primary methods for gathering information: (1) participating in the setting, (2) observing directly, (3) interviewing in depth, and (4) analyzing documents and material culture, with varying emphases. These form the core of their inquiry—the staples of the diet. This chapter provides a brief discussion of these primary methods considered in designing a qualitative study. Several secondary and somewhat more specialized methods of data collection supplement them: these are discussed in Chapter 7. This discussion does not replace the many excellent, detailed references on data collection (we refer to several at the end of this chapter). Its purpose is to guide the proposal writer in stipulating the methods of choice for his study and in describing for the reader how the data will inform his research questions. At the end of these discussions, as appropriate, we provide a short narrative on the salient ethical issues that may arise. How the researcher plans to use these methods, however, depends on several considerations.

Chapter 1 presented an introductory discussion of the assumptions that shape qualitative methods. As the grounding for a selection of methods, we extend that discussion here, using Brantlinger’s (1997) useful summary of seven categories of crucial assumptions for qualitative inquiry. While the discussion below suggests that these are binary positions, this is not the case. These sets of assumptions are more usefully gapped with as continua, which is how they are depicted in Table 6.1.

The first assumption concerns the researcher’s views of the nature of the research. Is the inquiry technical and neutral, intending to conform to traditional research within her discipline, or is it controversial and critical, with an explicit political agenda? Second, how does he construe his location, his positioning relative to the participants? Does he view himself as distant and objective or intimately involved in their lives?
Table 6.1 Dimensions of Assumptions in Qualitative Inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Assumptive Continua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the nature of the research?</td>
<td>Technical and neutral ↔ controversial and critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the relationship with participants?</td>
<td>Distant and objective ↔ intimate and involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the &quot;direction of gaze&quot;?</td>
<td>Outward, toward others ↔ inner contemplation and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the purpose of the research?</td>
<td>Professional and private ↔ useful to participants and the site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who is the intended audience?</td>
<td>Scholarly community ↔ the participants themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the researcher's political position?</td>
<td>Neutral ↔ explicitly political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the researcher's views on agency?</td>
<td>Passive ↔ engaged in local praxis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Brantlinger (1997).

Third, what is the "direction of her gaze"—is it outward toward others—externalizing the research problem—or does it include explicit inner contemplation?

Fourth, what is the purpose of the research? Does the researcher assume that the primary purpose of the study is professional and essentially private (e.g., promoting his career), or is it intended to be useful and informative to the participants at the site? Related to the fourth category is the fifth: Who is the intended audience of the study—the scholarly community or the participants themselves? Sixth, what is the researcher’s political positioning? Does he view the research as neutral, or does he claim an explicitly political agenda? Finally, the seventh assumption has to do with how the researcher views the exercise of agency: Does he see himself as the participants as essentially passive or as engaged in local praxis? (Brantlinger, 1997, p. 4). Assumptions made in these seven categories shape how the specific research methods are conceived and implemented throughout a study. At the proposal stage, some judicious and explicit discussion of assumptions strengthens the overall logic and integrity of the proposal.

The many books and articles describing the various ways a qualitative researcher might use the four primary methods (as well as secondary ones) are typically silent about the researcher who may be deaf or have hearing loss; the researcher who may be visually challenged; the researcher who uses a wheelchair; and other researchers who have physical or sensory challenges. In the discussion below, we try to be sensitive to differences in the ways qualitative researchers might act in a setting, as they draw on their perceptual and kinesthetic strengths. At this point, we emphasize that in the proposal, the researcher would have to outline the specific challenges in conducting the proposed research as well as strategies to build on her strengths to ensure that sound, reliable data are gathered.

**Observation**

Observation is central to qualitative research. The term captures a variety of activities that range from hanging around in the setting, getting to know people, and learning the routines to using strict time sampling to record actions and interactions and using a checklist to tick off pre-established actions. Whether enacted informally (as “hanging around” suggests) or formally (as using a checklist suggests), observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events, behaviors, and artifacts (objects) in the social setting. It is crucial that these observations be recorded—written down or talked into a tape recorder. This record is frequently referred to as field notes—detailed, nonjudgmental (as much as possible), concrete descriptions of what has been observed. Few studies rely exclusively on observation (but see the discussion of interaction analysis in Chapter 7), as researchers have come to appreciate how difficult it is to interpret actions and interactions and to seek insights from participants, often in the form of interviews (whether formal or informal). Qualitative researchers have also come to acknowledge the power inherent in proffering interpretations made from the researcher’s ideological standpoint.

Observation can be accomplished not only visually (as the discussion above suggests) but also through the other senses. A researcher with visual challenges could draw on his considerable auditory skills, his sense of touch, and his sense of smell to provide new and insightful descriptions of a particular setting.

In the early stages of qualitative inquiry, the researcher may enter the setting with broad areas of interest but without predetermined categories or strict observational checklists. As noted in Chapter 3, this stance captures the degree to which the study is prefigured or open-ended. Through a more open-ended entry, the researcher is able to discover the recurring patterns of behavior and relationships. After these patterns are identified and described through early analysis of field notes, checklists might become more appropriate and context sensitive. Focused observation may then be used at later stages of the study, usually to see, for example, if analytic themes explain behavior and relationships over a long time or in a variety of settings.
Observation is a fundamental and highly important method in all qualitative inquiry. It is used to discover complex interactions in natural social settings. Even in studies using in-depth interviews, observation plays an important role, as the researcher notes the interview partner’s body language and affects, tone of voice, and other paralinguistic messages, in addition to her words. When the researcher-as-observer depends on sensors other than sight, observations about movement and tone of voice become generative sources of insights. It is, however, a method that requires a great deal of the researcher. Discomfort, uncomfortable ethical dilemmas, and even danger; the difficulty of managing a relatively unobtrusive role, and the challenge of identifying the big picture while finely attending to huge amounts of fast-moving and complex behavior are just a few of the challenges.

Focused observations go beyond just “hanging out.” Planful and reflexive observers use observation systematically (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2001). At the proposal stage, the researcher should describe the purpose of the observing, the phase of the study in which it is likely to be most fruitful, and how data recorded in field notes might be analyzed to respond to the research questions.

Field notes are not scribbles, although they may begin that way. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) use the term “notings” (p. 19) to indicate the on-the-spot notes that a researcher might take. These are then elaborated into full field notes to be useful for subsequent analysis. To help in planning the observation process, the proposal writer should describe some explicit note-organizing and note management strategies, indicating to the reader that he is capable of noting events and interactions and transforming them into usable field notes. Figure 6.1 provides an example of edited “cleaned up” field notes for a study of kindergarten teachers. O’Hearn-Curran (1997) has formatted descriptive notes in a column on the left while reserving a second column on the right for her comments. The columns include her emerging analytic insights about the observed behavior. Observers’ comments are often a quite fruitful source of analytic insights and clues that focus data collection more tightly (more on this in Chapter 5). They may also provide important questions for subsequent interviews.

**Participant Observation**

Developed primarily from cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology, participant observation (as this method is typically called) is both an overall approach to inquiry and a data-gathering method. To some degree, it is an essential element of all qualitative studies. As its name suggests, participant observation demands firsthand involvement in the social world chosen for study—the researcher is both a participant (to varying degrees) and an observer (also to varying degrees). Immersion in the setting permits the researcher to hear, see, and begin to experience reality as the participants do. Should any of these senses be a challenge for the researcher, she can draw on others to describe, for example, a cacophony of sounds in a classroom, the subtle ways people seek approval from superiors through eye contact, and the like. Ideally, the researcher spends a considerable amount of time in the setting, learning about daily life there. This immersion offers the researcher the opportunity to learn directly from her own experience. Personal reflections are integral to the emerging analysis of a cultural group, because they provide the researcher with new vantage points and with opportunities to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange (Gitlin, 2005).

This method of gathering data is basic to all qualitative studies and invites consideration of the role or stance of the researcher as a participant observer—his or her positionality. This consideration links back to the assumption articulated by Brantlinger (1997) that the researcher’s stance is derived from the perspective. We have explored issues of role more fully in Chapter 3. We reiterate that, at the proposal
Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on depth interviewing (Kohlberg, 1969), describing qualitative interview as a "conversation with people" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Some qualitative interview methods are not formally planned in advance, but are developed during the interviews. The interviewer adapts the interview to fit the situation, and the interviewee contributes to the development of the interview. The interviewer may ask open-ended questions, allowing the interviewee to respond in any way they choose. This method is often used in ethnographic research, where the researcher is interested in understanding the perspectives of the people being studied.

Table 6.2: Data Collection Methods Related to Observation Role

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>I—Participant as observer</th>
<th>II—Observer as participant</th>
<th>III—Observer as nonparticipant</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation and recording of descriptive data</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Particularly useful to Role I in areas of guarded interaction and sentiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recording direct quotations or sentiment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured interview</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>If the researcher is skillful, a structure emerges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured interview guides</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Most useful in survey work (e.g., census)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detailed interaction guides</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Most useful in small-group work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction frequency schedules</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Measuring in observational studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paper-and-pencil tests</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Very helpful in certain circumstances for certain purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Questionnaires</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Scales</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Achievement or ability</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written records</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Very important to Role I in checking reliability of observation data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Newspapers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Official documents</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Letters</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Speeches</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio and television reports</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


NOTE: +, likely to be used; -, may occasionally be used; --, difficult or impossible to use.
Whether conducted on a television talk show, as part of a dating game, or as a research strategy, interviewing varies in terms of a priori structure and in the latitude the interview partner has in responding to questions or in creating them himself. In a sustained critique of the typical and historical stance that the researcher has control over the interview questions, Brown and Durheim (2009) argue for "mobile interviewing," that is, interviewing "while on the move (walking and/or driving)" (p. 911). These less structured and less formal venues disrupt deeply ingrained norms about "how to conduct an interview," "what the interviewer's role is," and "what the interviewee's role is."

Consistent with this critique are the metaphors developed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), where they describe researchers' stances toward the interview as those of a miner or a traveler (pp. 47-50). The miner approach assumes that ideas and knowledge exist within the interview partner; the interviewer's responsibility is to "dig nuggets of knowledge out of a subject's pure experiences" (p. 48), identifying the kernels or seams of priceless ore and mining them. The traveler, in contrast, is on a journey "to a distant country" (p. 48) with interview partners, either into "unknown terrain or with maps" (p. 48). The miner tends to assume that her role is more direct and objective, while the traveler is more intimately involved in co-constructing knowledge (see Table 6.1).

Patton (2002) categorizes interviews into three general types: (1) the informal, conversational interview; (2) the interview guide or topical approach; and (3) the standardized, open-ended interview (pp. 341-347). To these we would add the co-constructed, or the dialogic, interview (Norrisman & Ballis 2003). The informal, conversational interview takes place on-the-spot, as casual conversations are entered into with individuals and/or small groups. It is spontaneous and serendipitous. The interview guide is a bit more structured. The interview is scheduled, and the interviewer comes prepared with a list of topics or questions (which may or may not have been shared with the interview partner beforehand); this is the most typically used type of interview in qualitative studies. Standardized interviews are more carefully "scripted," asking specific questions in a specific sequence, sometimes without follow-up. This type of interview is often used in multisite case studies or with larger sample sizes. Finally, dialogic interviews may be scheduled, but both the interviewer and the interview partner generate new meaning together. Think of these types in terms of "talk time" (which is revealed, often quite dramatically, in transcripts). Informal and dialogic interviews show talk time; interviews that are topical or guided show more "talk" from the interview partner, as do standardized interviews.

With the more typical type—the topical or guided interview—the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover the participant's views but otherwise respects the way the participant frames and structures the responses. This method, in fact, is based on an assumption fundamental to qualitative research: The participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it (the emic perspective), not as the researcher views it (the etic perspective). As noted previously, a degree of systematization—a tighter prefiguring with more structure—in questioning may be necessary, for example, in a multisite case study or when many participants are interviewed, or at the analysis and interpretation stage, when the researcher is testing findings in more focused and structured questioning.

One of the most important aspects of the interview's approach is conveying the attitude that the participant's views are valuable and useful. The genuineness of the interview depends on both partners and their willingness to engage in a deep discussion about the topic of interest. As Kvale and Brinkman (2009) note, "An interview is literally an interview, an interchange of views between two persons" (p. 2). However, the qualitative researcher should bring some skills and sensibilities to the interview. Preparation is crucial, as is anticipating how he may be received and what ethical issues may arise, as discussed in Chapter 5 and at the end of this chapter. Also crucial for a fruitful interview are the researcher's skills in asking follow-up, elaborating questions. We argue that the richness of an interview is heavily dependent on these follow-up questions (often called, quite misleadingly, "probes"). Rossmann and Ballis (2003) discuss three main types: (1) open-ended elaborations, (2) open-ended clarifications, and (3) detailed elaborations (p. 188).

Interviews have particular benefits. Interviews yield data in quantity quickly. When more than one person participates (e.g., focus-group interviews, discussed below), the process takes in a wider variety of information than if there were fewer participants—the familiar trade-off between breadth and depth. Immediate follow-up and clarification are possible. Combined with observation (looking, hearing, smelling, or touching), interviews allow the researcher to understand the meanings that everyday activities hold for people. When conducted by a person who has challenges with hearing, an interview can be accomplished through the use of a signing interpreter or through writing questions and responses—both of which allow for immediate and direct follow-up questions.

Interviewing has limitations, however. Interviews are often intimate encounters that depend on trust; building trust—albeit time-bound—is important. In some cases, interview partners may be unwilling or may be uncomfortable sharing all that the interviewer hopes to explore, or they may be unaware of recurring patterns in their lives. Furthermore, the interviewer may not ask questions that evoke long narratives from participants because of a lack of fluency in or familiarity with the local language or because of a lack of skill in expressing themselves. By the same token, the interviewee may not sensitively understand and interpret responses to the questions or various elements of the conversation. And, at times, interview partners may have good reason not to be truthful (see Douglas, 1976, for a discussion).

Interviewers should have superb listening skills (or sign language skills) and be skillful at personal interaction, question framing, and general probing for elaboration. Volumes of data can be obtained through interviewing, but it is time-consuming to analyze them. Also worth considering is the issue of the quality of the data. When the researcher is using in-depth interviews as the sole way of gathering data, he should
Ethnographic Interviewing

Grounded in the genre of cognitive anthropology, ethnographic interviewing elicits the cognitive structures guiding participants' worldviews. Described in the classic work of Spradley (1979) as "a particular kind of speech event" (p. 18), ethnographic questions are used by the researcher to gather cultural data. Ethnographic interviewing is an elaborate system of a series of interviews structured to elicit participants' cultural knowledge. Spradley identifies three main types of questions: descriptive, structural, and contrast. Descriptive questions are quite broad, allowing the researcher to learn about the participants' views on "their experiences, their daily activities, and the objects and people in their lives" (Westby, Burda, & Mehta, n.d.). Structural questions discover the basic ways the participants organize their cultural knowledge into categories that are important to them (rather than those important to the interviewer). The ones found to be most generative are "strict inclusion, rationale, and means-ends questions" (Westby et al., n.d.). Strict inclusion questions put boundaries around salient categories of meaning; rationale questions focus on the participants' reasons for certain events or circumstances; and means-ends questions capture what leads to what, from the participants'
perspectives. Finally, contrast questions provide the ethnographer with the meaning of various terms that elaborate what something is like and what it’s not like.

The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture—broadly construed—from the participants’ perspectives and through firsthand encounters. This approach is especially useful for eliciting participants’ meanings for events and behaviors and for generating a typology of categories of meaning, highlighting the nuances of the culture. The method is flexible in formulating working hypotheses and avoids oversimplification in description and analysis because of its rich narrative descriptions.

There are shortcomings to this method. However, as with any method, the ethnographer can impose her values through the phrasing of questions or the interpretation of data. If the member of the cultural group chosen to participate does not represent that culture well, the subsequent analysis might be impoverished. The generativity of this method, as in all interviewing, depends highly on the researcher’s interpersonal skills.

Phenomenological Interviewing

Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share.

As elaborated by Seldman (2006), three in-depth interviews compose phenomenological inquiry. The first focuses on past experience with the phenomenon of interest; the second focuses on present experience; and the third joins these two narratives to describe the individual’s essential experience with the phenomenon. Prior to interviewing, however, the researcher using this method may have written a full description of his own experience, thereby bracketing off his experiences from those of the interview partners. This phase of the inquiry is referred to as epoché. The purpose of this self-examination is to permit the researcher to gain clarity from his own preconceptions, and it is part of the “ongoing process rather than a single fixed event” (Patton, 1990, p. 408).

The next phase is called phenomenological reduction; here, the researcher identifies the essence of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990). The researcher then clusters the data around themes that describe the “textures of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 150). The final stage, structural synthesis, involves the imaginative exploration of “all possible meanings and divergent perspectives” (p. 150) and culminates in a description of the essence of the phenomenon and its deep structure.

The primary advantage of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the interview partners. It focuses on the deep, lived meanings that events have for individuals, assuming that these meanings guide actions and interactions. It is, however, quite labor intensive and requires a reflexive stance on the part of the researcher. Phenomenological interviews have been quite successfully used in studies of teacher socialization (Maloy, Pine, & Seidman, 2002) and of the challenges to identity development of refugees (Moseley, 2006).

Focus-Group Interviews

The method of interviewing participants in focus groups comes largely from marketing research but has been widely adapted to include social science and applied research. The groups are typically composed of 7 to 10 people (although groups range from as small as 4 persons to as large as 12 persons) who are unfamiliar with one another and have been selected because they share certain characteristics relevant to the study’s questions. The interviewer creates a supportive environment, asking focused questions to encourage discussion and the expression of differing opinions and points of view. These focus-group interviews may be conducted several times with different individuals so that the researcher can identify trends in the perceptions and opinions expressed, which are revealed through careful, systematic analysis (Krueger & Casey, 2008). As with many methods, focus-group discussions can be conducted on a dedicated Internet blog that, in effect, creates a “virtual” focus group, not limited by time or location, such that many participants, from all over the world, can participate.

This method assumes that an individual’s attitudes and beliefs are socially constructed; they do not form in a vacuum. People often listen to others’ opinions and understandings in forming their own. Often, the questions in a focus-group setting are deceptively simple: the trick is to promote the participants’ expression of their views through the creation of a supportive environment.

The strengths of focus-group interviews are that this method is socially oriented, studying participants in an atmosphere more natural than artificial experimental circumstances and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview. When combined with participant observation, focus-group interviews can be especially useful for gaining access, focusing site selection and sampling, and even for checking tentative conclusions (Morgan, 1997). As with other types of interviews, the format allows the facilitator the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues as they arise in the discussion. The results have high “face validity”: Because the method is readily understood, the findings appear believable. Furthermore, the cost of focus-group interviews is relatively low, they provide quick results, and they can increase the sample size of qualitative studies by permitting more people to be interviewed at one time (Knieger & Casey, 2008). In action research and in program design and evaluation, focus groups are especially useful. They were useful tools, for example, in data gathering to design a program for working on the employment issues of persons with HIV/AIDS, based on their answers to questions.
about specific needs ranging from stress and availability of health care to family, spirituality, and hopes for the future (O'Neill, Small, & Strachan, 1999).

Focus-group interviews have also been found to be especially useful for fostering social support networks. For their discussion of the benefits and challenges of focus-group interviewing strategies, Peek and Fothergill (2009) analyzed three distinct research projects: (1) a study of teachers, children, and parents in urban day care settings; (2) the responses of Muslim Americans (both in the United States of Immigrant parents) to the events and aftermath of 9/11; and (3) a collaborative project on children and youth following Hurricane Katrina. In all three cases, the researchers found that focus-group interviewing eased access and, perhaps more importantly, for the participants, fostered the development of social ties that superseded the research projects.

There are, however, certain challenges to this method as well. First and foremost is the issue of power dynamics in the focus-group setting. Should the researcher choose to use this method, she should be acutely aware of power dynamics and be able to facilitate well—these are crucial skills. In addition, the interviewee often has less control over a group interview than an individual one. Time can be lost while irrelevant issues are discussed; the data are difficult to analyze because context is essential to understanding the participants' comments; the method requires the use of special room arrangements (or dedicated discussion sites) and highly trained facilitators; the groups can vary a great deal and can be hard to assemble; and logistical problems may arise from the need to manage a conversation while getting good-quality data.

We should also note that with relatively inexpensive and easy-to-use technology such as video recorders, focus-group discussions are increasingly videotaped. As with interaction analysis (see Chapter 7), using this technology creates a more or less permanent record of the data, which in turn facilitates analysis. Using video recorders (and any picture medium) may, however, raise important ethical issues about the protection of the identities of participants. This is discussed more fully in the next section.

**Ethical Issues in Focus-Group Interviews**

As just noted, the primary ethical issues that may arise in conducting focus-group interviews center on the dynamics of power and influence that may play out in any group (whether physically together or on an Internet blog). The researcher must be acutely sensitive to these dynamics (e.g., is Robert dominating the discussion?) and be skilled at facilitating the process. Should the discussion be videotaped, the privacy of individuals and protection of their identities become paramount. We are aware of IRBs that, quite appropriately, require additional statements on informed consent forms that specifically address using video clips or still photographs in any ensuing research reports. Their use can immediately identify participants and therefore requires a more complex statement about the use of the data to ensure that the participants are fully informed. In fact, we would argue that using photographs or video clips of individuals or groups abrogates the respect for persons' consideration of anonymity. This is a thorny ethical issue that, in this digital age, will continue to be debated.

These issues, and others, arise in life history methodologies. This family of methods focuses explicitly on the stories individuals tell about their lives and includes narrative inquiry, digital storytelling, and the use of memories.

**Life Histories, Narrative Inquiry, and Digital Storytelling**

Life histories and narrative inquiry are in-depth interview methods that gather, analyze, and interpret the stories people tell about their lives. They assume that people live "storied" lives and that telling and retelling one's story helps one understand and create a sense of self. The story is important, but so is how the story is told (Riessman, 1993). The researcher, working closely with the participants, explores a story and records it. Life histories and narrative inquiry are used across the social science disciplines and are particularly useful for giving the reader an insider's view of a culture or era in history as such, they represent the application of the principles of biography to the social sciences. A related approach is digital storytelling, in which an individual (or possibly a group) tells a story using digital content—images, sound, and perhaps video. Digital storytelling may or may not involve interviewing; we include it here because it fits well with the focus of life histories and narrative inquiry on narrating stories. Each is discussed below.

**Life Histories**

Life histories seek to "examine and analyze the subjective experience of individuals and their constructions of the social world" (Jones, 1983, p. 147). They assume a complex interaction between the individual's understanding of his world and that world itself. They are, therefore, uniquely suited to depicting and making theoretical sense of the socialization of a person into a cultural milieu (Dollard, 1935). Thus, one understands a culture through the history of one person's development or life within it, a history told in ways that capture the person's feelings, views, and perspectives. The life history is often an account of how an individual enters a group and becomes socialized into it. That history includes learning to meet the normative expectations of that society by gender, social class, or age peers. Life histories emphasize the experience of the individual—how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals.

Life histories can focus on critical or fateful moments. Indecision, confusion, contradiction, and irony are captured as nuanced processes in a life (Sparks, 1994). These histories are particularly helpful in defining socialization and in studying aspects of acculturation and socialization in institutions and professions. Their value goes beyond
providing specific information about events and customs of the past—as a historical account might—by showing how the individual creates meaning within the culture. Life histories are valuable in studying cultural changes that have occurred over time, in learning about cultural norms and transgressions of those norms, and in gaining an inside view of a culture. They also help capture the way cultural patterns evolve and are linked to the life of an individual. Often, this point of view is missing from standard ethnographies (Atkinson, 1998).

One strength of life history methodology is that it pictures a substantial portion of a person’s life, the reader can enter into those experiences. Another is that it provides a fertile source of intriguing research questions that may be generative for focusing subsequent studies. And yet a third strength is that life histories depict actions and perspectives across a social group that may be analyzed for comparative study. This kind of research requires sensitivity, caring, and empathy by the researcher for the researched (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Life histories are often used in feminist research as a way of understanding, relatively free of androcentric bias, how women’s lives and careers evolve (Lawless, 1991).

Jones (1983, pp. 153–154) offers five criteria for life histories. First, the interview should be viewed as a member of a culture: the life story “describes[s] and interpret[s] the actor’s account of his or her development in the commonsense world.” Second, the method should capture the significant role that others play in “transmitting socially defined stocks of knowledge.” Third, the assumptions of the cultural world under study should be described and analyzed as they are revealed in rules and codes for conduct as well as in myths and rituals. Fourth, life histories should focus on the experience of an individual over time so that the “processual development of the person” can be captured. Fifth, the cultural world under study should be continuously related to the individual’s unfolding life story.

The major concerns with the life history are that generalizing is difficult, sample sizes are by definition quite small, and there are few concepts to guide analysis. Once the researcher acknowledges the possible challenges with the method, however, she can address them, perhaps by supplementing in-depth interviews—“storying”—with other sources. For example, official records may provide corroborating information or may illuminate aspects of the culture absent from an individual’s account. In addition, the researcher might substantiate meanings presented in a history by interviewing others in a participant’s life. Before publishing The Professional Thief, for example, Sutherland and Conwell (1983) submitted the manuscript to four professional thieves and two police detectives to assess possible bias and to ensure that their interpretations resonated with the understandings of other professional thieves and those who come in contact with them.

A life history account can add depth and evocative illustration to any qualitative study. As with any qualitative genre, however, the abundance of data collected in a life history should be managed and reduced so that analytic headway can be made. Instead of using chronological order to present the story, the researcher might focus on (a) critical dimensions or aspects of the person’s life, (b) principal turning points and the life conditions between them, and (c) the person’s characteristic means of adaptation (Mandelbaum, 1973).

**Narrative Inquiry**

Closely related to life history is narrative inquiry, an interdisciplinary method that views life holistically and draws from traditions in literary theory, oral history, drama, psychology, folklore, and film philosophy (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The method assumes that people construct their realities through narrating their stories. The researcher explores a story told by a participant and records that story. Narrative inquiry can be applied to any spoken or written account—for example, to an in-depth interview. As noted on the homepage of the journal Narrative Inquiry, this method “gives[s] contour to experience and life, conceptualize[s] and preserve[s] memories, or hand[s] down experience, tradition, and values to future generations” (www.clarku.edu/faculty/mbamberg/narrativeINQ/, accessed March 2, 2009).

Narrative inquiry requires a great deal of openness and trust between participant and researcher. The inquiry should involve a mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense and active listening and giving the narrator full voice. Because it is a collaboration, however, it permits both voices to be heard.

This method is criticized for its focus on the individual rather than on the social context. Like life histories, however, narrative inquiry seeks to understand sociological questions about groups, communities, and contexts through individuals’ lived experiences. Like any method that relies on participants’ accounts, narrative may suffer from recalling selectively, focusing on subsets of experience, filling in memory gaps through inference, and reinterpreting the past (Row & Conway, 1986). Furthermore, narrative inquiry is also time-consuming and laborious and requires some specialized training (Viney & Boudifeld, 1991). Several researchers have articulated criteria for good narrative inquiry (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Jones, 1983; Riesman, 1993).

Narrative inquiry is a relatively newcomer to the social sciences and applied fields, but it has a long tradition in the humanities because of its power to elicit voice. Narrative inquiry values the signs, the symbols, and the expression of feelings in language and other symbol systems, validating how the narrator constructs meaning. It has been particularly useful in developing feminist and critical theory (Eisner, 1988; Green, 1988; Riesman, 1993). And it is especially useful when exploring issues of social change, causality, and social identity (Eliott, 2005) and when studying participants’ experiences of violence, trauma, or genocide (Keats, 2009).

Narrative inquiry may rely on journal records, photographs, letters, autobiographical writing, e-mail messages, and other data. Typically, the field notes or interview transcripts are shared with the narrator, and the written analysis may be constructed
collaboratively. In the conduct of narrative inquiry, there is open recognition that the researcher is not just passively recording and reporting the narrator’s reality. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that researchers need to “be prepared to follow their nose and, after the fact, reconstruct their narrative of inquiry” (p. 7). This becomes, in effect, the recounting of methodology.

Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is a new approach to narrating stories that draws on the power of digitized images to support the content of the story. Emerging in the mid-1990s, the method has been developed to enable ordinary people to tell their stories. It thus has an empowering and/or emancipatory ideology, seeking to encourage people to give voice (and image and sound) to their life experiences. As noted on the Educause Web site, “Digital storytelling is fundamentally the application of technology to the age-old experience of sharing personal narratives. What’s new is the growing availability of sophisticated tools.” (Educause, n.d.)

Supported by video-editing computer applications, such as iMovie” (for Macs) or MovieMaker” (for PCs), the storyteller first constructs a narrative (the story) by writing a script or outline, then enhances this with still images, video clips, sound clips, and the like. These digitized elements may come from the storyteller’s own archives or could be taken from the Internet as publicly available. Blending the storyline with these other elements represents the craft and art of digital storytelling.

Digital storytelling has been widely used in community development projects and educational settings; it has great appeal to young people who are very comfortable with software and willing to “hack around” to figure out how to create a compelling story. However, the open-ended nature of this highly creative process can be intimidating to some, and the costs of equipment may be prohibitive. Several universities and community-based organizations offer workshops on digital storytelling, creating a supportive group environment for experimentation and learning. The final product—the digital story—is often quite short, typically between four and eight minutes long.

Ethical Issues in Life Histories, Narrative Inquiry, and Digital Storytelling

The ethical issues that may arise in life history research or narrative inquiry, as with many types of interviewing, center on the relationship with the participant. Especially when focusing on one individual, the researcher must be exquisitely sensitive to disclosing more about the person than he is comfortable with. This demands a more collaborative approach to the research, as noted previously, where the participant and the researcher co-construct the history or narrative. This stance will help avoid the ethical problems associated with revealing more than the participant cares to have revealed. A related ethical issue is the challenge to fully protect the individual’s identity and facts of his private life. This is a delicate matter, one that should be fully addressed in the proposal.

Digital storytelling represents somewhat different ethical challenges, since the production of the story is under the control of the storyteller. The issues that may arise here center on unauthorized uploading of highly personal digital stories to the Internet. This is a challenge that anyone using this method should keep in mind.

We now turn to a discussion of specific populations that the qualitative researcher might want to gather data from, or with: elites, children, and those with different social identities than those of the researcher.

Interviewing Elites

Interviewing elites—individuals in positions of power and influence—has a long history in sociology and organizational studies. An interview with an “elite” person is a specialized case of interviewing that focuses on a particular type of interview partner. Elite individuals are considered to be influential, prominent, and/or well-informed in an organization or community; they are selected for interviews on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research and for their perspectives on, for example, an organization, a community, or specialized fields such as the economy or health policy. Citing the work of several organizational scholars, Delaney (2007) identifies various types of elites: philanthropic elites—often quite wealthy and known for major contributions or endowments to individuals, organizations, or causes; political elites—those elected or appointed to political office; ultra-elites—for example, Nobel Laureates or Olympic athletes; and organizational elites—CEOs or presidents of companies. For example, elites have attained status through extreme wealth and social responsibility (philanthropists); through success in attaining political office (politicians); through recognition of their scientific or scholarly accomplishments or extreme athletic achievement (awarded); or through achieving senior positions in organizations. One can well imagine other types.

Elite interviewing has many advantages. Valuable information can be gained from these participants because of the positions they hold in social, political, financial, or organizational realms. Taking organizational elites as an example, these individuals can provide an overall view of a company or its relationship to other companies, albeit from their own experiences and viewpoints. They may be quite familiar with legal and financial structures. Elites are also able to discuss an organization’s policies, histories, and plans, again from a particular perspective, or have a broad view on the development of a policy field or social science discipline. Bernis and Naranjo’s (2003) study of 90 corporate executives is a strong example of the former: Stephens’s study of macroeconomists and the changing conception of their field (2007) shows how elite and ultra-elite scholars...
understand their field. Many studies of political elites have been conducted. Other elites, such as religious leaders, could be generative participants, as could leaders of gangs or cults, union bosses, or tribal chiefs.

Elite interviewing also presents challenges. It is often difficult to gain access to elites because they are usually busy people operating under demanding time constraints: they are also often difficult to contact initially. We should note that this is also a consideration in other circumstances: busy school teachers, rural village women who have substantial work responsibilities, health care workers, and so on. With elite individuals particularly, the interviewer may have to rely on sponsorship, recommendations, and introductions for assistance in making appointments.

Another challenge in interviewing elites is that the interviewer may have to adapt the planned structure of the interview, based on the wishes and predilections of the person interviewed. Although this is true with all in-depth interviewing, elite individuals who are used to being interviewed by the press and other media may well be quite sophisticated in managing the interview process. Sophistication and political astuteness are not exclusively the domain of elites, and we do not mean to suggest that they are. They may want an active interplay with the interviewer. Well practiced at meeting the public and being in control, an elite person may turn the interview around, thereby taking charge of it. When there are considerable (and obvious) status differentials between the interviewer and the elite interview partner, this may become more of an issue. As Delaney (2007) asks, under these circumstances, “Who controls the interview?” She offers the principle from jujitsu of “using your opponent’s momentum to your own advantage” (p. 215). Elites often respond well to inquiries about broad areas of content and to open-ended questions that allow them the freedom to use their knowledge and imagination.

Working with elites often places great demands on the ability of the interviewer to establish competence and credibility by displaying knowledge of the topic or, lacking such knowledge, by projecting an accurate conceptualization of the problem through thoughtful questioning. The interviewer’s hard work usually pays off, however, in the quality of information obtained. Elites may contribute important insight about the topic of the study through their specific perspectives. On the other hand, elites (just like other interview partners) may well have only vague understandings of a setting that is limited by a narrow viewpoint.

Interviewing and Conducting Research With Children and Youth

We begin this section by noting, quite sadly, that most of the materials available from publishers and on the Internet about interviewing and conducting research with children and youth are written for counselors, psychologists, police, health care workers, forensic experts, and lawyers. The issues covered include sexual abuse, parental abuse, custody issues, and the like. This is a very sad commentary on U.S. society today. However, our focus here is neither pathological nor legalistic; we are interested in those circumstances when the qualitative researcher may be interested in interviewing children and youth to learn about how they see some aspect of their worlds—a considerably more benign focus than those just described.

Thus, children or youth may be the primary focus of a study or one of many groups the researcher wants to interview or learn from more broadly. Increasingly, there are calls for including children’s and youth’s perspectives as relevant and insightful in learning more about aspects of their worlds. These arguments draw support from the new sociology of childhood (Adjoah-Anders & Berman, 2009; referencing Greene & Hill, 2005), which calls for “listening to the voices of children: when conducting research about their lives” (Adjoah-Anders & Berman, 2009, p. 931). This is especially true in education, where all too often, those most affected by educational policy and programmatic decisions—the students—are absent from inquiry. There are special considerations, however, when the qualitative researcher proposes a study that involves children and other young people.

One such consideration might be the children’s or youth’s dominant or preferred mode of communication. Children and youth who use sign language to communicate or whose medium of communication is pictures or music at times require specialized tools for communicating. In their study with “Ian,” a child who communicates primarily through “physical movements, gestures, and vocalisations”, Adjoah-Anders and Berman (2009, p. 933) found it generative to use tools with pictures to eliciting Ian’s perspectives on schooling. The demand here, whatever the circumstances, is that all attempts be made to respect the child or the youth—through whatever media—to better understand her life world.

Also important are age considerations. Interviewing preschoolers, for example, is quite different from interviewing early adolescents. Young children are often active; early adolescents are frequently very self-conscious. Three-year-olds, exploring their emerging language skills, can drive one to distraction with their incessant questions (often quite sophisticated ones), whereas early adolescents may be taciturn. It is unrealistic to expect young children to sit still for long, but joining them in some activity can create a climate for focused talk. One might use the projective technique of “play” with younger children, as is often done in psychotherapeutic settings. In contrast, some adolescents may feel more comfortable with their peers in a focus-group interview, whereas others may prefer the intimacy of one-to-one interviews. Decisions about how to gather data with various age groups requires sensitivity to their needs and their developmental issues and flexibility. As Eder and Fingerson note (2003), creating a natural context is crucial, but what constitutes “natural” will depend on the age of the participants.

Second are role considerations with associated power dynamics. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) note that the roles an adult researcher assumes when studying
Ethical Issues in Interviewing Children and Youth

The ethical issues in interviewing children and youth center on protecting them from harm as a result of participating in the study, protecting their identities and privacy, and being diligent to ensure that they are willingly participating in the study. The injunction of *primum non nocere*—first, do no harm—is especially important for the researcher to be scrupulous about. Children receive special consideration in the principles and practices for the protection of human subjects because of their relative vulnerability. Thus, the researcher proposing a study that involves children and youth must assure the reviewers of the proposal that he is exquisitely sensitive to the power dynamics between himself and the children, that he will make extra effort to protect the children from harm (physical or psychological), and that parents or guardians continuously support the children’s participation (e.g., an informed consent form is necessary but not sufficient, as discussed in Chapter 3).

Interviewing Across Differences in Social Identities

Since the publication of the fourth edition of this book, much has been written about the complexities of conducting research across differences in social identities between researcher and participants. The research and theorizing about differences in race, ethnicity, first language, gender, sexual orientation, ability-bodiedness, and so on have taken up a central place in the qualitative inquiry discourse. A few stances have emerged: There are those who take the position, for example, that only women should interview women and men just won’t be effective. And there are others who argue that interviewing those with the same or similar social identities risks the researcher’s assuming too much static knowledge. And there are yet others for whom this issue is complex and nuanced; taking a single position doesn’t contribute to thoughtful qualitative research. This latter position is the one we take.

That said, there are considerations at the proposal stage that should be addressed. A short discussion of some of the issues that might be encountered in the proposed research, depending on the research participants, will strengthen the reader’s view that the researcher is sensitive to and thoughtful about these issues. There are two circumstances to be particularly aware of. When the researcher shares an aspect of social identity—gender, for example—with participants, he should be cautious about assuming that he understands the interview partner’s experience *just because he’s a man, too*. And he should guard against the interview partner making the same assumptions. Conversely, he should not avoid research sites or participants just because he does *not* share some aspect of social identity. Both of these positions are problematic, in our view.

As an example of a related issue, sharing professional identity, Rossmann recalls interviewing teachers about a reform effort in their school and that she, too, had been a classroom teacher. In response to a question about everyday work in the school, one teacher responded, “Well, you know what it’s like. You’ve been here.” Rossmann had to think quickly and follow up with, “Yes, but each school is different.” So tell me about what it’s like here.” If she had not followed up, she would have been left with few data.

Two examples are particularly illustrative of these issues. Foster’s (1994) classic work explored issues of race, gender, geography, and age. She found that sharing the identity of being black Americans (her term) did not necessarily foster shared understandings. Gender, geography (living in the northern or southern United States), and age also shaped the ease—or difficulty—of conducting interviews with the participants. Thus, sharing one salient social identity—race—was not always sufficient for seamless interviews. The title of her chapter, “The Power to Know One Thing Is Never the Power to Know All Things,” captures the issue that sharing differing social identities may complicate an interview, especially when the researcher assumes that sharing blackness, in this case, would be sufficient. Similarly, Riessman’s (1991) study, focusing on women’s experiences of divorce, used long, life history interviews. While both the researchers and the participants shared the gender identity of being women, they varied in terms of social class, first language, and place of origin. The interviews with middle-class white women conducted by middle-class white women, went relatively smoothly, while the interviews with working-class Latina women did not. Riessman’s analysis focuses on the differing narrative styles the women used in the interviews. The middle-class white researchers had difficulty understanding the narrative style of the Latinas, having assumed that gender would be enough (to paraphrase the title of the chapter). Recalling the discussion about queer theory, which articulates that identity is fluid, we cannot automatically assume being “in” with a certain population. The fact that two people drive the same type of car does not necessarily mean that their experiences are the same or even somewhat similar; queer theory recognizes the multiplicity of identities and how they interact and affect one another, challenging simplistic notions of shared identity categories.

Ethical Issues in Interviewing

Perhaps the most obvious fact about interviewing is that it is an intervention. As Patton (2002) notes, “A good interview lays open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience.
not only to the interviewer but also to the interviewee" (p. 405). Thus, the ethical issues that may emerge in any interview context on the relationship between the researcher and the interview partner: Is that relationship non-manipulative? Is there the potential for reciprocity? Is there the potential for pain and anguish when the person interviewed shares painful experiences? These kinds of concerns, along with the ethical implications of data collection and the potential for harm to participants, are critical considerations in qualitative research.

5. Identify the methods for collecting primary data.

We turn now to a discussion of using artifacts of material culture—documents, objects, songs, pictures, and the like—as an integral part of a typical qualitative research study at the proposal stage. The writer will need to argue why and how inclusion of such materials will help participants respond to his research questions and, ultimately, enrich his analysis and interpretations.

**ARTIFACTS OF MATERIAL CULTURE: DOCUMENTS AND OTHER OBJECTS**

The artifacts that individuals, organizations, families, agencies, townships, or larger social groups produce take multiple forms. Some are documents; others are objects—pictures, clothing, pottery, trash. Documents, in particular, are drawn on in a qualitative study. Various kinds of documents can provide background information that helps establish the rationale for selecting a particular site, program, or population; this is very relevant for the proposal. For example, the researcher may gather demographic data or describe geographic and historical particulars to justify selection of a site for the research. When she reviews old property transactions, looks at recent newspaper editorials, or obtains information from a Web site about an organization, she is collecting data, but these data are used in the proposal to demonstrate that a particular site or setting will be generative. A different use of documents may be proposed as part of the in-depth data gathering for a study. For example, records of meetings, transcriptions of court cases, or personal letters may be identified in the proposal as useful sources of data to be gathered. In addition, she may propose that participants generate documents: journal entries or writing samples. Both uses of documents are valuable. In addition to documents, however, the researcher may propose to gather and learn about objects in the setting.

Researchers often supplement participant observation, interviewing, and observation with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of everyday events or constructed specifically for the research at hand. As such, the analysis of documents is potentially quite rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting. Minutes of meetings, logs, announcements, formal policy statements, letters, and so on are all useful in developing an understanding of the organization, setting, or group studied. Research journals and samples of writing, as mentioned above, can also be quite informative. For her dissertation research in Composition Studies, Rosenberg (2006) used writing samples of newly literate adults to guide her interviews; this was particularly evocative of deeper insights into the challenges of literacy for adults, some of whom were becoming literate in a second or third language.

Archival data—documents often recording official events—are the routinely gathered records of a society, community, or organization. These may further supplement other qualitative methods. For example, marital patterns among a group of Mexicans, discovered through fieldwork in a community, could be tested through marriage records found in the offices of the county seat or state capital. Descriptions of articulated funding priorities by policymakers could be corroborated or not through an analysis of budgetary allocations. As with other methodological decisions, the decision to propose gathering and analyzing documents or archival records should be linked to the research questions developed in the conceptual framework for the study. Furthermore, the analysis and interpretation of documents should be approached cautiously because the inferential span is long, that is, the meaning of the documents is not transparent. In the proposal, if arguing to gather and analyze documents, the researcher would want to indicate how he would seek corroboration of the meaning of the documents through other methods.

An analysis of other artifacts—the ones not encoded in text—might also be fruitful for a qualitative study. In fact, classic ethnographic research focused on many such artifacts: religious icons, clothing, housing forms, food, and so on. The researcher may well determine that focusing on some artifacts in the setting would add richness to the corpus of data to be gathered. For example, Toole and Wes (2008) found that examining space and material culture in their study of a technology company added greatly to their insights about "power, identity, and status" (p. 616). As a further example, studies in classrooms might include student artwork, the decoration of walls, or clothing, for example. Photographs (discussed below) might also be included.

The use of documents may entail the analytic approach called content analysis. The raw material for content analysis is typically text: textbooks, novels, newspapers, e-mail messages, political speeches. Historically, content analysis was viewed as an objective and neutral way of generating a quantitative description of the content of various forms of communication; thus, counting the number of times specific words and terms appeared was central to the method (Berelson, 1952). As this process has evolved, however, researchers now focus on the presence, meanings, and relationships of words and concepts, then make inferences about the messages (Busch et al., 2005). Thus today, the process is viewed more generously as a method for describing and interpreting the written productions of a society or social group.

Probably the greatest advantage of using documents and other artifacts is that it does not disrupt ongoing events. These materials can be gathered without disturbing the netting. The researcher determines where the emphasis lies after the data have been
gathering. A potential weakness, however, is the span of inferential reasoning, as noted above. That is, the analysis of written materials or photographs or clothing, for example, entails interpretation by the researcher, just as in the analysis of interactively gathered data. Minutes of meetings and Nike sneakers do not speak for themselves. Care should be taken, therefore, in displaying the logic of interpretation used in inferring meaning from the artifacts.

Ethical Issues in Using Documents and Artifacts

The ethical issues in relying on documents and artifacts center on how publically available these materials are. Using public materials might seem harmless, but the researcher should nonetheless consider how using them might harm the organization or individuals (even though not specifically identified). Would analysis and writing about these materials denigrate those who produced them? In what ways? Could the researcher be viewed as an artifact “lurker”? A spy? More private materials should be subjected to even closer ethical reasoning. Even if a research participant agrees to write a journal for research purposes, what if she discloses troublesome information? How should the researcher respond? The overall consideration here is for the researcher to ask, “Are the producers of these artifacts likely to feel exposed or that their privacy has been violated if these materials are used?”

Some combination of these primary research methods is typical for in-depth qualitative inquiry. In Vignette 18, Shadduck-Hernandez (1997) articulates a complex design that incorporates several. The vignette is adapted from her proposal for research about CIRCLE (Center for Immigrant and Refugee Leadership and Empowerment), a participatory project involving newcomer undergraduate students, graduate students, and members from refugee and immigrant communities.

**VIGNETTE 18 Using Multiple Methods**

Imagine 12 university students, on a chilly Saturday morning, sprawled out on a classroom floor formulating a proposal on scattered sheets of newspaper. Laughter, silence, and intense discussion highlight the waiting process of these authors, who are first-generation refugee and immigrant (newcomers) students from China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and Korea participating in an undergraduate seminar on cross-cultural experiences in community development.

This dissertation research acknowledges the real tensions that exist in any qualitative research endeavor. Certain models can be rigid, one-way streets if they seduce participants into a process of inquiry in which the researcher alone is the analyzer and interpreter of data. This study consciously:

Shadduck-Hernandez’s (1997) discussion of the various sources of qualitative data—some generated as part of the CIRCLE project, others to be generated specifically for the dissertation—is eloquently congruent with her assumptions about the nature of this work, its purpose and audience, and her political stance. Note that she plans to rely on several methods: documents in the form of journals, self-reflective writing, and papers written for courses or conferences (both her own and those of the student participants); focus-group interviews; in-depth interviews; and video and photography. (Videotaping and photography are discussed in Chapter 8 as secondary or specialized methods, although one could base an entire study on videos and pictures.)

With many of the primary methods, transcription and translation challenges must be addressed. Even in his own culture, a white, middle-class sociology scholar will encounter challenges in transcribing and translating, for example, in-depth interviews of adolescents’ attitudes toward religion (Smith & Fans, 2002). We turn to a discussion of these important issues next.

**Issues With Transcribing and Translating**

Especially when using interviews in a study, transcribing and (perhaps) translating text are critically important tasks. Unfortunately, many introductory texts on qualitative
research are silent on these issues, providing little guidance to the writers of proposals about how to handle them. We argue that neither is a merely technical task, both entail judgment and interpretation. When data have been translated and/or transcribed, they are not raw data any more—they are “processed data” (Wengraf, 2001, p. 7). And we agree with materials available on the RECOUP Web site that “all social research involves translation, if only from the ‘language of the streets’ into formal academic prose” (Singal & Jeffery, 2008, sec. 2). Thus, the methodological literature is now offering discussions about the issues in transposing the spoken word (from a tape recording) into a text (a transcription) or in transposing the spoken word in one language (from a tape recording) into another language (a translation) and then into a text (a transcription). We have further found that the ethical issues arising from transcribing and translating are now being discussed (we discuss some below).

Transcribing

If the researcher is fortunate enough to have interview partners who are comfortable with tape recordings, she leaves the research encounter with spoken words, dutifully and seemingly unproblematically recorded on tape. Those who have then sat down to transcribe the tapes, however, know well the pitfalls of assuming that the spoken word closely parallels the written one. We do not speak in paragraphs, nor do we signal punctuation as we speak. The judgments involved in placing something as simple as a period or a semicolon are complex and shape the meaning of the written word and, hence, of the interview itself. Similarly, the visual cues that we rely on to interpret another’s meaning are lost when we listen to a tape; the transcriber no longer has access to those important paralinguistic cues about meaning. (See ‘Idey, 2003, for further discussion.)

For example, Rossman (1994) conducted interviews for an evaluation of a systemic school reform initiative. One interview partner used a discursive style that could be described as complex and dense. The interview partner would begin one topic, then loop to another mid-sentence, then on to another, finally saying, “Where was I?” and returning to the original topic after a prompt from the interviewer. Although this style is fascinating, it was extremely difficult to transcribe—sentences were interrupted by the speaker herself. Topics were left unfinished, and overall clarity was difficult to ascertain. Rossman struggled with this transcription, finally sharing it with the interview partner to be sure that the meaning was accurately rendered in the transcribed account of her words. In another example, Chase’s (1995) study of women school superintendents, responses to questions were replete with long pauses, in which the subject was changed. These gaps were, in the end, interpreted as indicators of a strong pattern of avoiding talking about and even denying experiences of sex discrimination—a major finding in her study. What if this researcher had made the mistake of simplistic transcription? But, there is a cautionary note here: The meaning of pauses in conversation is not transparent: the researcher should use caution, as did Chase, in drawing inferences and offering interpretations of these linguistic patterns.

Experiences such as this are common. The implication is that the researcher needs to discuss the problematic nature of transcribing in the proposal and provide strategies for handling the judgments and interpretations inherent in such work. One valuable strategy is to share the transcriptions with the interview partners for their confirmation (or not) that the transcription captures their meaning and intent if not always their precise punctuation. We also note that the transcription of audio tapes is greatly facilitated by the use of software such as Olympus Digital Wave Player, discussed below.

Translating

Clearly, the issues associated with translating from one language into another are much more complex than those concerning transcribing because they involve more subtle matters of connotation and meaning. As noted above, the methodological literature has recently grown to include essays discussing the difficult issues with translating (Esposito, 2001; Temple & Young, 2004). Of particular note, in light of a recurring theme in this edition, is the work of Temple and Young (2004), who raise issues in the context of translating from American Sign Language into standard written English. Writing in the context of the need for more sophistication in cross-language health research with refugee and immigrant populations, Esposito (2001) notes that translation is "the transfer of meaning from a source language . . . to a target language" and that the translator is "actually an interpreter who . . . processes the vocabulary and grammatical structure of the words while considering the individual situation and the overall cultural context" (p. 570). Thus, the focus on generating insightful and meaningful data through translation processes is paramount.

Note the use of the term interpreter in the above quote. This is a crucial insight, as it permits us to lift the burden of absolute accuracy from transcriptions and translations. Our position is that this goal is a chimera; what we should aim for is a reasonable approximation of the interview partner’s words and intent. Subtle nuances in meaning are signaled by punctuation and paragraphing (as in transcribing), and phrases and concepts generated in one language rarely translate directly into another. Clearly, using another person, other than the researcher, to transcribe the recorded interviews and using an interpreter to gather data (as might arise when working across languages) complicate the processes immeasurably.

The work of Temple and Young (2004) raises three important questions: (1) whether to identify the translation act in the research report; (2) whether it matters if the researcher is also the translator; and (3) whether to involve the translator in analysis. It is especially intriguing that their analysis of translation issues focuses on a spatial language—American Sign Language. While their questions help move the field forward, Rossman’s experience in her graduate teaching, working intensively with students whose first language (or even second or third) is not English, critiques their discussion. Each issue they identify is problematic. In response, we argue that there is an ethical imperative to inform the reader that translation has occurred and to address how this will be (in the case
of a proposal) or has been (in the case of a final research report) managed. Second, more issues of meaning and interpretation arise when someone other than the researcher translates spoken or written words. Third, since translation entails the construction of meaning, we believe that analysis is happening whether or not it is acknowledged.

So what are the important issues with translating the spoken or written word? Most important are the processes and procedures that the researcher/translator has used (or will use, as should be discussed in the proposal) to construct meaning through multiple transpositions of the spoken or written word from one language into another. Rossmann and Raftis (2003, p. 260) identify three others:

1. If you have translated from one language to another, which language constitutes the direct quotes?
2. Can you use translated words as a direct quote?
3. How do you signal that a translation is accurate and captures the subtle meanings of the original language?

There are no simple strategies or blueprints for addressing these and other issues associated with translation. What is simple and clear, however, is that the reader of the proposal must know that the researcher understands the issues, will take an ethical stance on translating, and will make clear in the final report just what he has done. Rossmann insists that her students discuss the language for interviewing (and/or document review) in the proposal, indicating whether or not the student is fluent in the language. If the researcher is not, what strategies will be used to ensure accuracy and subtlety in translation? Rossmann also recommends that students include phrases and key words from the original language from time to time in their final narratives. Translations or interpretations of those phrases can be put into parentheses with the caveat that there is no direct translation of the phrase’s meaning into English. Including phrases or words in the original language (often italicized) also serves as a reminder to the reader that the interviews were originally conducted in a language other than English. This subtle reminder helps decenter the hegemony of an English-centered world.

Two examples are taken from the dissertation research of doctoral students who conducted research in Malawi and Guatemala. The first one, a doctoral student who proposed a mixed-methods study of a complex policy domain in Malawi (Macalister-Mbewe, 2004), described how he would use the local language, Chichewa, for his interviews. Since he was fluent in this language, this posed no real problem for his dissertation committee. In his dissertation, he included several words and phrases that had evocative meaning in Chichewa but did not translate easily into English. The second student, Cohen-Mitchell (2006), studied the literacy and numeracy practices of market women in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, for her dissertation. She was fluent in Spanish but not in Quiché, the local language of the women in her study. She had to convince her dissertation committee that

she would work closely with Rosa, an educated literacy practitioner fluent in Quiché and Spanish, as a co-researcher and an interpreter to obtain strong data from the women. Cohen-Mitchell proposed, moreover, that she would take Quiché lessons during her fieldwork to improve her limited understanding of that language. She used both Quiché and Spanish phrases and words in her dissertation.

Issues of transcribing and translating are subtle and complex: they are not merely technical tasks. The writer of a qualitative research proposal has an ethical obligation to discuss these issues and how she will approach them, especially since qualitative research generates words—the primary symbol system through which meaning is conveyed and constructed. Not all of the issues can be solved at the proposal stage, but, in fact, we are quite skeptical of those who write that they have them all wrapped up. Instead, the proposal should have a thoughtful discussion of the more generic issues of transcribing and translating, as well as the ones specific to the research site and participants. These issues harken back to the section on Cultural Studies, which highlights and deconstructs representations to uncover forms of power. The authority—the authorial voice—represents power to be used with respect.

Ethical Issues in Transcribing and Translating

The ethical issues that arise in transcribing and translating others’ words center on how we represent our research participants, how we demonstrate respect for them in transposing their spoken words into text that we then manipulate and write up. Thus, in transcribing, what stance will the researcher take on “cleaning up” words, sentences, and phrases? Is it ethical to represent our interview partners who have spoken to us in incomplete sentences or used incorrect grammar exactly that way? Or are we doing them a disservice in presenting their imperfect speech to the world in dissertations or articles? When translating from one language to another, how do we ensure that we have shown respect for our research partners in representing their worldviews and thoughts? These issues center on respect for our participants that becomes more salient when we transform their words into analyzed categories and represent these publically.

Rossmann conducted an evaluation of a school reform effort in a largely immigrant section of a northeastern city. The data that she and her evaluation team gathered consisted of interviews and samples of students’ written work. Many of the latter were written as one would expect of an early English language learner (as well as any newly literate schoolchild), with misspellings, incorrect grammar, reversed letters, and the like. The principal of the school was shocked when she saw these in a draft report and asked that the evaluation team “clean them up,” certainly before the report was submitted to the School Council. The team did so. Was this an ethical decision? What trade-offs did they have to make? What might have been sacrificed? What gained?

* * *
This chapter has provided an overview of several key methods that qualitative researchers typically use as well as salient ethical issues that may arise. We have also discussed considerations in transcribing tapes and translating from one language into another, whether tape-recorded interviews or field notes. At the proposal stage, the writer should consider how the selection of any particular method will inform the research questions, thereby extending and deepening knowledge on the topic. As a guide for assessing which primary methods will be useful, Tables 6.3 and 6.4 offer judgments about each method's strengths and challenges.

A solid rationale for the choice of methods is crucial, as it indicates to the reviewer of the proposal that the choice of methods is grounded in the conceptual framework and builds on previous theoretical, empirical, and methodological knowledge. These same considerations apply for the somewhat more specialized methods discussed in Chapter 8.

### Table 6.3 Strengths of Primary Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>PO</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>NI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fosters face-to-face interactions with participants</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for uncovering participants' perspectives</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collected in a natural setting</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates immediate follow-up for clarification</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuable for documenting major events, crises, conflicts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential for framing about participants' unconscious thoughts</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for describing complex interactions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for obtaining data on verbal behavior and communication</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates discovery of nuances in culture</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides flexibility in framing, wording, hypotheses</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides information on context</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitates analysis, validity checks, and triangulation</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages cooperation and collaboration</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** X = strength exists; D = depends on use; PO = participant observation; O = observation; I = interview; FG = focus-group interview; MC = material culture, including documents; NI = narrative inquiry.

### Table 6.4 Challenges in Using Primary Data Collection Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>PO</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>NI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leads researchers to fixate on details</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible misinterpretations due to cultural differences</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires technical training</td>
<td>D</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on cooperation of key individuals</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readily open to ethical dilemmas</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult to replicate</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 6.4 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>PO</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>FG</th>
<th>MC</th>
<th>NI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data more affected by researcher presence</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expensive travel and equipment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can cause discomfort or even danger to</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too dependent on participant openness/honesty</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too artistic an interpretation undermines the</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on power of initial research questions</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depends on researcher's interpersonal skills</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: X = challenges exists; D = depends on use; PO = participant observation; O = observation; I = interview; FG = focus-group interview; MC = material culture, including documents; NI = narrative inquiry.
Ethnographic Interviewing


Phenomenological Interviewing


Focus-Group Interviewing


Life Histories, Narrative Inquiry, and Digital Storytelling


Interviewing Elites


Interviewing and Studying (With) Children


**Interviewing Across Social Identities**


TRANSLATING AND TRANSCRIBING


USING DOCUMENTS AND MATERIAL CULTURE


