
CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Go to the People

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THE TERM *methodology* refers to the way in which we approach problems and seek answers. In the social sciences, the term applies to how research is conducted. Our assumptions, interests, and purposes shape which methodology we choose. When stripped to their essentials, debates over methodology are debates over assumptions and purposes, over theory and perspective.

Two major theoretical perspectives have dominated the social science scene (Bruyn, 1966; Deutscher, 1973; also see Creswell, 2012; Saldaña, 2011).¹ The first, positivism, traces its origins in the social sciences to the great theorists of the 19th and early 20th centuries and especially to Auguste Comte (1896) and Émile Durkheim (1938, 1951). The positivist seeks the facts or causes of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals. Durkheim (1938, p. 14) told the social scientist to consider social facts, or social phenomena, as “things” that exercise an external influence on people.

The second major theoretical perspective, which, following the lead of Deutscher (1973), we describe as phenomenological, has a long history in philosophy and sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bruyn, 1966; Husserl, 1962; Psathas, 1973; Schutz, 1962, 1966). The phenomenologist, or interpretivist (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992), is committed to understanding social phenomena from the actor’s own perspective and examining how the world is experienced. The important reality is what people perceive it to be. Jack Douglas (1970, p. ix) wrote, “The ‘forces’ that move human beings,

as human beings rather than simply as human bodies...are 'meaningful stuff.' They are internal ideas, feelings, and motives."

Since positivists and phenomenologists take on different kinds of problems and seek different kinds of answers, their research requires different methodologies. Adopting a natural science model of research, the positivist searches for causes through methods, such as questionnaires, inventories, and demography, that produce data amenable to statistical analysis. The phenomenologist seeks understanding through qualitative methods, such as participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and others, that yield descriptive data. In contrast to practitioners of a natural science approach, phenomenologists strive for what Max Weber (1968) called *verstehen*, understanding on a personal level the motives and beliefs behind people's actions (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011).

This book is about qualitative methodology—how to collect descriptive data, people's own words, and records of people's behavior. It is also a book on how to study social life phenomenologically. We are not saying that positivists cannot use qualitative methods to address their own research interests: Durkheim (1915) used rich descriptive data collected by anthropologists as the basis for his treatise *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. We are saying that the search for social causes is neither what this book is about nor where our own research interests lie.

We return to the phenomenological or interpretivist perspective later in this chapter, for it is at the heart of this work. It is the perspective that guides our research.

A NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Descriptive observation, interviewing, and other qualitative methods are as old as recorded history (R. H. Wax, 1971). Wax pointed out that their origins can be traced to historians, travelers, and writers ranging from the Greek Herodotus to Marco Polo. It was not until the 19th and early 20th centuries, however, that what we now call qualitative methods were consciously employed in social research (Clifford, 1983).

Frederick LePlay's 1855 study of European families and communities stands as one of the first genuine pieces of qualitative research (Bruyn, 1966). Robert Nisbet (1966) wrote that LePlay's research represented the first scientific sociological research:

But *The European Working Classes* is a work squarely in the field of sociology, the first genuinely scientific sociological work in the century . . . Durkheim's *Suicide* is commonly regarded as the first "scientific" work in sociology, but it takes

nothing away from Durkheim's achievement to observe that it was in LePlay's studies of kinship and community types in Europe that a much earlier effort is to be found in European sociology to combine empirical observation with the drawing of crucial inference—and to do this acknowledgedly within the criteria of science. (p. 61)

In anthropology, field research came into its own around the turn of the century. Boas (1911) and Malinowski (1932) can be credited with establishing fieldwork as a legitimate anthropological endeavor. As R. H. Wax (1971, pp. 35–36) noted, Malinowski was the first professional anthropologist to provide a description of his research approach and a picture of what fieldwork was like. Perhaps due to the influence of Boas and Malinowski, in academic circles field research or participant observation has continued to be associated with anthropology.

We can only speculate on the reasons why qualitative methods were so readily accepted by anthropologists and ignored for so long by sociologists and other social researchers. Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897/1951), which equated statistical analysis with scientific sociology, was extremely influential and provided a model of research for several generations of sociologists. It would be difficult for anthropologists to employ the research techniques, such as survey questionnaires and demographics, that Durkheim and his predecessors developed: We obviously cannot enter a preindustrial culture and ask to see the police blotter or administer a questionnaire. Further, whereas anthropologists are unfamiliar with and hence deeply concerned with everyday life in the cultures they study, sociologists probably take it for granted that they already know enough about the daily lives of people in their own societies to decide what to look at and which questions to ask.

Yet qualitative methods have a rich history in American sociology. The use of qualitative methods first became popular in the studies of the Chicago school of sociology in the period from approximately 1910 to 1940 (Bulmer, 1984; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). During this period, researchers associated with the University of Chicago produced detailed participant observation studies of urban life (N. Anderson, *The Hobo*, 1923; P. G. Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, 1932; Thrasher, *The Gang*, 1927; Wirth, *The Ghetto*, 1928; Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum*, 1929); rich life histories of juvenile delinquents and criminals (Shaw, *The Jack-Roller*, 1930; Shaw, *The Natural History of a Delinquent Career*, 1931; Shaw, McKay, & McDonald, *Brothers in Crime*, 1938; Sutherland, *The Professional Thief*, 1937); and a classic study of the life of immigrants and their families in Poland and America based on personal documents (W. I. Thomas & Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 1927). Up until the 1940s, people who called themselves students of society were familiar with participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and personal documents.

As important as these early studies were, interest in qualitative methodology waned toward the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s with the growth in prominence of grand theories (e.g., Parsons, 1951) and quantitative methods. With the exception of W. F. Whyte's (1943, 1955, 1981, 1993) *Street Corner Society*, few qualitative studies were taught and read in social science departments during this era.

Since the 1960s there has been a reemergence in the use of qualitative methods, and qualitative methodologies have moved in new directions (see DeVault, 2007 for an overview). So many powerful, insightful, and influential studies have been published based on these methods (e.g., E. Anderson, 1990, 1999, 2011; Becker, 1963; Duneier, 1999; Erikson, 1976; Hochschild, 1983; Kang, 2010; Lareau, 2001; Liebow, 1967; Thorne, 1993; Vaughan, 1997) that they have been impossible to discount. What was once an oral tradition of qualitative research has been recorded in monographs (Berg & Lune, 2011; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2012, 2014; Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Esterberg, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lofland, 1971, 1976; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Riessman, 2008; Saldaña, 2011; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Silverman, 2013; Spradley, 1979, 1980; Stake, 1995; ten Have, 2004; Van Maanen, Dabbs, & Faulker, 1982; C. A. B. Warren & Karner, 2014; W. F. Whyte, 1984; Yin, 2011, 2014) and edited volumes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Emerson, 1983; Filstead, 1970; Glazer, 1972; Luttrell, 2010; McCall & Simmons, 1969; Van Maanen, 1995). There also have been books published that examine the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research (Bruyn, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2011; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Prasad, 2005), relate qualitative methods to theory development (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Prus, 1996; Saldaña, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), describe writing strategies for reporting qualitative research (Becker, 2007; Richardson, 1990b; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 2009), and contain personal accounts of researchers' experiences in the field (Douglas, 1976; Fenstermaker & Jones, 2011; Hertz, 1997; J. M. Johnson, 1975; Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991; Shaffir, Stebbins, & Turowetz, 1980; R. H. Wax, 1971). In sociology alone, there are journals devoted to publishing qualitative studies (*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Sociology*) and to qualitative inquiry generally (*International Review of Qualitative Research*, *Qualitative Inquiry*). Sage Publications produced short monographs on different slices of qualitative research starting in 1985 (edited by Van Maanen, Manning, and Miller), and the number reached nearly 50. Interest in qualitative methodology has grown so much that several publishers have produced encyclopedic handbooks on qualitative methods generally and on particular branches of qualitative inquiry (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012; Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013).

Paralleling the growing interest in qualitative research in sociology has been an increased acceptance of these methods in other disciplines and applied fields. Such diverse disciplines as geography (DeLyser, Herbert, Aitken, Crang, & McDowell, 2010; Hay, 2010), political science (McNabb, 2004), and psychology (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Fischer, 2005; *Qualitative Research in Psychology*) have seen the publication of edited books, texts, and journals on qualitative research methods over the past decade and a half. The American Psychological Association started publishing the journal *Qualitative Psychology* in 2014. Qualitative methods have been used for program evaluation and policy research (Bogdan & Taylor, 1990; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; M. Q. Patton 1987, 2008, 2010, 2014; Rist 1994). Journals and texts on qualitative research can be found in such diverse applied areas of inquiry as health care and nursing (Latimer, 2003; Munhall, 2012; Streubert & Carpenter, 2010; *Qualitative Health Research*), mental health, counseling, and psychotherapy (Harper & Thompson, 2011; McLeod, 2011), education (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*; Lichtman, 2010; *Qualitative Research in Education*), music education (Conway, 2014), public health (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005), business (Meyers, 2013), theology (Swinton & Mowat, 2006), disability studies (Ferguson et al., 1992), human development (Daly, 2007; Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996), social work (Sherman & Reid, 1994; *Qualitative Social Work*), and special education (Stainback & Stainback, 1988).

One does not have to be a sociologist or to think sociologically to practice qualitative research. Although we identify with a sociological tradition, qualitative approaches can be used in a broad range of disciplines and fields.

Just as significant as the increasing interest in qualitative research methods has been the proliferation of theoretical perspectives rooted in the phenomenological tradition underlying this form of inquiry. We consider the relationship between theory and methodology more fully later in this chapter.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The phrase *qualitative methodology* refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data—people’s own written or spoken words and observable behavior. As Ray Rist (1977) pointed out, qualitative methodology, like quantitative methodology, is more than a set of data-gathering techniques. It is a way of approaching the empirical world. In this section we present our notion of qualitative research.

1. *Qualitative researchers are concerned with the meaning people attach to things in their lives.* Central to the phenomenological perspective and hence qualitative research is understanding people from their own frames of reference and

experiencing reality as they experience it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things. Herbert Blumer (1969) explained it this way:

To try to catch the interpretative process by remaining aloof as a so-called “objective” observer and refusing to take the role of the acting unit is to risk the worst kind of subjectivism—the objective observer is likely to fill in the process of interpretation with his² own surmises in place of catching the process as it occurs in the experience of the acting unit which uses it. (p. 86)

As suggested by Blumer’s quote, qualitative researchers must attempt to suspend, or set aside, their own perspectives and taken-for-granted views of the world. Bruyn (1966) advised the qualitative researcher to view things as though they were happening for the first time. Nothing is taken for granted. Psathas (1973) wrote:

For the sociologist, a phenomenological approach to observing the social world requires that he break out of the natural attitude and examine the very assumptions that structure the experience of actors in the world of everyday life. A method that provides assistance in this is “bracketing” the assumptions of everyday life. This does not involve denying the existence of the world or even doubting it (it is not the same as Cartesian doubt). Bracketing changes my attitude toward the world, allowing me to see with clearer vision. I set aside preconceptions and presuppositions, what I already “know” about the social world, in order to discover it with clarity of vision. (pp. 14–15)

2. *Qualitative research is inductive.* Qualitative researchers develop concepts, insights, and understandings from patterns in the data rather than collecting data to assess preconceived models, hypotheses, or theories. Glaser and Strauss (1967) coined the phrase “grounded theory” to refer to the inductive theorizing process involved in qualitative research that has the goal of building theory. A theory may be said to be grounded to the extent that it is derived from and based on the data themselves. Lofland (1995) described this type of theorizing as “emergent analysis” and pointed out that the process is creative and intuitive as opposed to mechanical.

In qualitative studies, researchers follow a flexible research design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). We begin our studies with only vaguely formulated research questions. However we begin, we do not know for sure what to look for or what specific questions to ask until we have spent some time in a setting. As we learn about a setting and how participants view their experiences, we can make decisions regarding additional data to collect on the basis of what we have already learned.

Of course, qualitative researchers operate within theoretical frameworks. Pure induction is impossible (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). We can never escape all of our assumptions about the world, and we all approach our research with some goals and questions in mind. Even an interest in social meanings directs our attention to some aspects of how people think and act in a setting and not to others. Within a broad theoretical framework, the goal of qualitative research is to make sure the theory fits the data and not vice versa.

DeVault (1995b) cautioned against taking the principles of Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory approach too literally. As she pointed out, what is missing from the data may be just as important for theorizing as what is there. For the purposes of inductive reasoning, it is important to be sensitive to unstated assumptions and unarticulated meanings.

3. *In qualitative methodology the researcher looks at settings and people holistically; people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables, but are viewed as a whole.* The qualitative researcher studies people in the context of their pasts and the situations in which they find themselves (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Tracy, 2013; Yin, 2011).

When we reduce people's words and acts to statistical equations, we can lose sight of the human side of social life. When we study people qualitatively, we get to know them personally and experience what they experience in their daily struggles in society. We learn about concepts such as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, and love, whose essence is lost through other research approaches. We learn about "the inner life of the person, his moral struggles, his successes and failures in securing this destiny in a world too often at variance with his hopes and ideals" (Burgess, as quoted by Shaw [1930/1966, p. 4]).

4. *Qualitative researchers are concerned with how people think and act in their everyday lives.* Qualitative research has been described as naturalistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This means that researchers adopt strategies that parallel how people act in the course of daily life, typically interacting with informants in a natural and unobtrusive manner (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). In participant observation, most researchers try to "blend into the woodwork," at least until they have grasped an understanding of a setting. In qualitative interviewing, researchers model their interviews after a normal conversation rather than a formal question-and-answer exchange. Although qualitative researchers cannot eliminate their effects on the people they study, they attempt to minimize or control those effects or at least understand them when interpreting data (Emerson, 1983).

5. *For the qualitative researcher, all perspectives are worthy of study.* The qualitative researcher rejects what Howard Becker (1967) referred to as the

“hierarchy of credibility”; namely, the assumption that the perspectives of powerful people are more valid than those of the powerless. The goal of qualitative research is to examine how things look from different vantage points. The student’s perspective is just as important as the teacher’s; the juvenile delinquent’s as important as the judge’s; the so-called paranoid’s as important as the psychiatrist’s; the homemaker’s as important as the breadwinner’s; that of the African American (Puerto Rican, Mexican, Vietnamese American, Haudenosaunee, etc.) as important as that of the European American (English, Swedish, Italian, Irish, Polish, etc.); that of the researched as important as the researcher’s.

In qualitative studies, those whom society ignores—the poor and the so-called deviant—often receive a forum for their views. Oscar Lewis (1965, p. xii), famous for his studies of the poor in Latin America, wrote, “I have tried to give a voice to a people who are rarely heard.” Ironically, although Lewis’s studies were filled with rich descriptions, his interpretations of the people he studied blamed their “culture” for the social inequalities they faced.

6. *Qualitative researchers emphasize the meaningfulness of their research.* Qualitative methods allow us to stay close to the empirical world (Blumer, 1969). They are designed to ensure a close fit between the data and what people actually say and do. By observing people in their everyday lives, listening to them talk about what is on their minds, and looking at the documents they produce, the qualitative researcher obtains firsthand knowledge of social life unfiltered through operational definitions or rating scales.

Whereas qualitative researchers emphasize the meaningfulness of their studies—or what some people term *validity* (Deutscher, Pestello, & Pestello, 1993)—quantitative researchers emphasize reliability and replicability in research (Rist, 1977). As Deutscher et al. (1993, p. 25) wrote, reliability has been overemphasized in social research:

We concentrate on whether we are consistently right or wrong. As a consequence we may have been learning a great deal about how to pursue an incorrect course with a maximum of precision.

This is not to say that qualitative researchers are unconcerned about the accuracy of their data. A qualitative study is not an impressionistic, off-the-cuff analysis based on a superficial look at a setting or people. It is a piece of systematic research conducted with demanding, though not necessarily standardized, procedures. In the chapters that follow, we discuss some of the checks researchers can place on their data recording and interpretations. However, it is not possible to achieve perfect reliability if we are to produce

meaningful studies of the real world. LaPiere (quoted in Deutscher et al., 1993) wrote:

The study of human behavior is time consuming, intellectually fatiguing, and depends for its success upon the ability of the investigator Quantitative measurements are quantitatively accurate; qualitative evaluations are always subject to the errors of human judgment. Yet it would seem far more worthwhile to make a shrewd guess regarding that which is essential than to accurately measure that which is likely to prove irrelevant. (p. 19)

7. *For the qualitative researcher, there is something to be learned in all settings and groups.* No aspect of social life is too mundane or trivial to be studied. All settings and people are at once similar and unique. They are similar in the sense that some general social processes may be found in any setting or among any group of people. They are unique in that some aspect of social life can best be studied in each setting or through each informant because there it is best illuminated (Hughes, 1958, p. 49). Some social processes that appear in bold relief under some circumstances appear only faintly under others. Of course, the researcher's own purposes will determine which settings and groups will be the most interesting and yield the most insights.

8. *Qualitative research is a craft* (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Qualitative methods have not been as refined and standardized as other research approaches. This is in part a historical artifact that is changing with the establishment of conventions for collecting and analyzing data and in part a reflection of the nature of the methods themselves. Qualitative researchers are flexible in how they go about conducting their studies. The researcher is a craftsperson. The qualitative social scientist is encouraged to be his or her own methodologist (Mills, 1959). There are guidelines to be followed, but never rules. The methods serve the researcher; never is the researcher a slave to procedure and technique. As Dalton (1964, p. 60; and see Dalton, 1961) wrote, "If a choice were possible, I would naturally prefer simple, rapid, and infallible methods. If I could find such methods, I would avoid the time-consuming, difficult and suspect variants of 'participant observation' with which I have become associated."

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The phenomenological perspective is central to our conception of qualitative methodology. What qualitative methodologists study, how they study it, and how they interpret it all depend upon their theoretical perspective.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The phenomenologist views human behavior, what people say and do, as a product of how people define their world. The task of the phenomenologist, and of qualitative methodologists like us, is to capture how people construct their realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As we have emphasized, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from other people's points of view.

The phenomenological perspective is tied to a broad range of theoretical frameworks and schools of thought in the social sciences. We identify in different ways with a theoretical perspective known as symbolic interactionism or social constructionism (constructivism), and we treat this perspective as a point of departure for the discussion of other frameworks that have emerged more recently.³

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism stems from the works of Charles Horton Cooley (1902), John Dewey (1930), George Herbert Mead (1934, 1938), Robert Park (1915), W. I. Thomas (1931), and others. Mead's (1934) formulation in *Mind, Self, and Society* was the clearest and most influential presentation of this perspective. Mead's followers, including Howard Becker (Becker, Geer, & Hughes, 1968; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961), Herbert Blumer (1967, 1969), and Everett Hughes (1958), have applied his insightful analyses of the processes of interaction to everyday life.

The symbolic interactionist places primary importance on the social meanings people attach to the world around them. Blumer (1969) stated that symbolic interactionism rests on three basic premises. The first is that people act toward things, including other people, on the basis of the meanings these things have for them. Thus people do not simply respond to stimuli or act out cultural scripts. It is the meaning that determines action.

Blumer's second premise is that meanings are not inherent in objects, but are social products that arise during interaction: "The meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing" (Blumer, 1969, p. 4). People learn how to see the world from other people. As social actors, we develop shared meanings of objects and people in our lives.

The third fundamental premise of symbolic interactionism, according to Blumer, is that social actors attach meanings to situations, others, things, and themselves through a process of interpretation. Blumer (1969) wrote:

This process has two distinct steps. First, the actor indicates to himself the things toward which he is acting; he has to point out to himself the things that have meaning. Second, by virtue of this process of communicating with himself, interpretation becomes a matter of handling meanings. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action. (p. 5)

This process of interpretation acts as an intermediary between meanings or predispositions to act in a certain way and the action itself. People are constantly interpreting and defining things as they move through different situations. Social organization is built through these activities; that is, the activities produce particular social settings, communities, and societies.

We can see why different people say and do different things. One reason is that people have had different experiences and have learned different social meanings. For instance, people holding different positions within an organization have learned to see things in different ways. Take the example of a student who breaks a window in a school cafeteria. The principal might define the situation as a behavior control problem; the counselor, as a family problem; the janitor, as a clean-up problem; and the school nurse, as a potential health problem. The student who broke the window does not see it as a problem at all (unless and until he or she gets caught). Further, the race, gender, or class of any of the participants may influence how the participants view the situation and define each other.

A second reason why people act differently is that they find themselves in different situations. If we want to understand why some adolescents commit crimes and others do not, we cannot simply examine their demographic characteristics, but we must look at the situations they confront.

Finally, the process of interpretation is a dynamic process. How a person interprets something will depend on the meanings available and how he or she sizes up a situation. Something as seemingly unambiguous as the flick of an eyelid can be interpreted as a sexual advance, recognition of shared understanding, expression of superiority, or an involuntary tic.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, all organizations, cultures, and groups consist of actors who are involved in a constant process of interpreting the world around them. Although people may act within the framework of an organization, culture, or group, it is their interpretations and definitions of the situation that determine action, not their norms, values, roles, or goals.

You might be thinking that there are other social science researchers besides qualitative researchers who are concerned with how people perceive the world. After all, there are those operating within the positivist tradition who employ concepts such as attitudes, values, opinions, personality, and others that suggest that they want to know how their subjects think. In general, however, their approaches treat attitudes and other such mental states that they attribute to their subjects as causing behavior, and as fixed, rather than situational and evolving through interaction.

Many years after the articulation of symbolic interactionism by Blumer, this perspective and variants such as labeling theory (Becker, 1963; Kitsuse, 1962; Lemert, 1951), Goffman's (1959, 1961, 1963, 1967, 1971) dramaturgy ("all the world is a stage"), and social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bogdan & Taylor, 1989; Schwandt, 2007) remain influential among qualitative researchers. Symbolic interactionism is not alone, however.

Since the late 1960s, a large number of theoretical perspectives rooted in the phenomenological tradition have achieved visibility in the social sciences. Here we review some of the major perspectives—ethnomethodology, feminist research, institutional ethnography, postmodernism, narrative analysis, and multi-sited, global methods.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was developed by Harold Garfinkel and was first articulated in his widely read book *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967; also see Garfinkel, 2002). Ethnomethodology refers not to research methods but rather to the subject matter of study: how (the methodology by which) people maintain a sense of an external reality (Mehan & Wood, 1975, p. 5). For the ethnomethodologists, the meanings of actions are always ambiguous and problematic. Their task is to examine the ways people apply abstract cultural rules and commonsense understandings in concrete situations to make actions appear routine, explicable, and unambiguous (R. Turner, 1974). Meanings, then, are practical accomplishments on the part of members of society.

A study by D. Lawrence Wieder (1974) illustrated the ethnomethodological perspective. Wieder explored how addicts in a halfway house use a convict code (axioms such as “do not snitch” and “help other residents”) to explain, justify, and account for their behavior. He showed how residents “tell the code” (apply maxims to specific situations) when they are called upon to account for their actions:

The code, then, is much more a method of moral persuasion and justification than it is a substantive account of an organized way of life. It is a way, or set of ways, of causing activities to be seen as morally, repetitively, and constrainedly organized. (Wieder, 1974, p. 158)

Consistent with the European phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1962), the ethnomethodologists bracket or suspend their own belief in reality to study the reality of everyday life. Garfinkel (1967) studied the commonsense or taken-for-granted rules of interaction in everyday life through a variety of mischievous experiments he called “breaching procedures” in which the researcher breaks social rules intentionally in order to study people’s reactions and how they try to repair the social fabric.

Through an examination of common sense, the ethnomethodologists seek to understand how people “go about the task of seeing, describing, and explaining order in the world in which they live” (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1970, p. 289).

One of the most productive areas of study in ethnomethodology is conversational analysis (Coulon, 1995). By closely observing and recording conversations—in medical encounters, for example (Beach & Anderson, 2004;

Beach, Easter, Good, & Pigeron, 2004) or in campus talk about racial identities (Buttny & Williams, 2000)—ethnomethodologists examine how people negotiate and jointly construct meanings in conversation (Psathas, 1995; Sacks, 1992).

Ever since the publication of Garfinkel's influential book on ethnomethodology, social scientists have debated the place of ethnomethodology within social theory. For some, ethnomethodology fell squarely within the symbolic interactionist perspective (Denzin, 1970). For others, it represented a radical departure from other sociological traditions (Coulon, 1995; Zimmerman & Wieder, 1970). Mehan and Wood (1975) characterized ethnomethodology as a separate enterprise from sociology.

Although interest in ethnomethodology peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, an international network of researchers continues to develop the perspective (the International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis; see <http://www.iiemca.org/>), and many of the insights and concepts developed by ethnomethodologists have been incorporated by researchers writing from different theoretical perspectives, including symbolic interactionism. For example, the idea that researchers and informants construct meanings together in interview situations can be traced to ethnomethodology (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Feminist Research

Perhaps the most significant development in qualitative research over the past several decades has been the growing prominence of feminist research perspectives, due in large part to the establishment and growth of women's and gender studies as fields of teaching and research (DeVault, 1990; Gilligan, 1982; Olesen, 2011; Reinhartz, 1992; D. E. Smith, 1987, 1990). As Olesen (1994, 2011) noted, feminist research is not a single activity; there are many feminisms and many varieties of feminist research.

Early feminist scholars critiqued existing research for leaving women and their concerns out of the picture; they argued that bringing women's experiences into view would produce fresh insights, and the work that has been done since has certainly confirmed that view. A legitimate criticism of many of the classic urban ethnographies in the qualitative tradition is that women are missing from them. For example, W. F. Whyte's (1943, 1955, 1981, 1993) *Street Corner Society* and Liebow's (1967) *Tally's Corner* attempted to analyze the social organization of poor urban communities by a nearly exclusive focus on male members of street-corner groups. As Richardson (1992) noted, feminist scholarship showed that a look at urban life from the vantage point of women yields a very different picture (Ladner, 1971; Stack, 1974).

Most feminist research builds on the ideas of social oppression and inequality, and feminist researchers have joined with those concerned with other dimensions of inequality. From this perspective, qualitative research

must be conducted with an understanding of how the broader social order oppresses different categories of people by race, gender, or class. These researchers refer to the simultaneous, interwoven effects of these oppressions as “intersectionality.” More generally, feminist research takes as subject matter for study issues of potential importance to women and uses women’s standpoint as a point of departure for research.

A solid contribution of feminist research since the 1990s has been the publication of studies rooted in the qualitative tradition but undertaken with attention to women or from a woman’s standpoint. For example, in Kanter’s book *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1993), she analyzed work life in a large organization from a vantage point that included the predominantly female clerical staff and executives’ wives, as well as the few women working as tokens in male-dominated occupational categories. In her book *Feeding the Family*, DeVault (1991) examined the gendered nature of the invisible work that goes into the preparation of food. DeVault provided insights into not only women’s household work but the construct of family itself:

I have argued that the feeding work traditionally undertaken by women is both produced by and produces “family” as we have known it—the work itself “feeds” not only household members but also “the family,” as ideological construct. Thus, taken-for-granted, largely unarticulated understandings of family stand in the way of equity. (p. 236)

Thorne’s (1993) participant observation study *Gender Play* analyzed scenes that will seem familiar to practically any reader. Through interactions with “kids” (as Thorne noted, how children define themselves) and close observation of school playgrounds, Thorne explored the social construction of gender and how different contexts shape gender-related patterns in children’s play. Building on the work of other feminist researchers, Traustadóttir (1991a, 1991b, 1995) studied the nature of caregiving among family members, friends, and human service workers of people with disabilities. She showed how the concept of caring obscures the difference between affective attachments (“caring about”) and the day-to-day work involved in supporting people with disabilities (“caring for”). The study of paid and unpaid carework has since become a lively area of research. Qualitative researchers have explored the work of paid domestics and child-care workers (e.g., MacDonald, 2010; Rollins, 1985), the lives of immigrant careworkers and their relations with brokers, employers, and their families (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Romero, 2011), and the unpaid work of mothering, in different communities and contexts (Garey, 1999; Hansen, 2005; Hays, 1996).

As demonstrated by feminist researchers, gender is not only a fruitful area for study, theorizing, and writing, but a factor that warrants methodological attention as well. Women may face special problems conducting research in male-dominated settings (Easterday, Papademas, Schorr, & Valentine, 1977;

C. A. B. Warren & Rasmussen, 1977). The British sociologist Ann Oakley (1981) argued that interviewing women in conventional ways could be a “contradiction in terms.” As a feminist researcher, she wanted to do research to help participants, but she had been taught to respond in a noncommittal way if an interviewee asked her a question (saying, for example, “I haven’t really thought about that”). However, she found that many of the women participants saw her as a knowledgeable friend and asked her for information about childbirth and motherhood; she didn’t feel it was right to ignore or deflect those requests. DeVault (1990) also pointed out that interviewing with women may require special attention to the nuances of language and experiences that are not easily captured by conventional linguistic forms (for example, the distinction reflected in the terminology of work and leisure may not adequately reflect many of women’s activities). Other researchers, such as Riessman (1987), have cautioned that “gender is not enough” and urged feminist researchers to be aware of similar issues related to race, ethnicity, and social class, in keeping with their commitment to intersectional analysis.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography was developed by Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, as a feminist sociology (1987), and has since become more widely known and used as “a sociology for people” (2005). Institutional ethnographers think of the approach as more than just a method; it is a mode of inquiry that combines distinctive ways of conducting research with its own theoretical grounding—or more precisely, its ontological principles. (“Ontology” refers to the researcher’s sense of what is “there” in the world we investigate, and institutional ethnographers are committed to the idea that social organization is always built from people’s activities.) During the 1980s, Smith built on the feminist critique of male-centered scholarship and developed a mode of investigation that begins with the experiences and activities of some “anchor” group—women, people with disabilities, teachers or students, and so on—and then goes on to explore the web of social relations that produces those experiences (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2005). The central idea is to conduct an investigation “for” rather than “of” the group—that is, not just to describe the group’s perspectives but instead to develop knowledge that will be useful for that group.

Like phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists, institutional ethnographers look closely at people’s activities and how people work together. They also attend to the coordination of activity across different spaces, largely through documents and discourses, in order to extend the research beyond what people already know from their everyday lives (McCoy, 2008). These texts are seen as key elements in social organization that have become increasingly significant in societies no longer governed through face-to-face relationships. Institutional ethnographers study texts ethnographically; that

is, they are always interested in field-based study of “texts in use,” rather than simply reading the documents. Following the lead of Marx (D. E. Smith, 1987), institutional ethnographers identify ideological modes of thought and action embedded in governing documents, and trace their consequences in people’s lives.

Institutional ethnography has proved especially useful in applied fields and in social movements, where practitioners and participants wish to understand the broader contexts for their practice. For example, nursing researchers have explored the ways that nursing work is transformed when hospitals engage in cost-cutting reforms; nurses on the floor come to understand principles of quality care, for example, in new ways, responsive to management’s rather than nurses’ or patients’ interests (Rankin & Campbell, 2006). Activist researchers, such as George Smith (1990), have used institutional ethnography to locate promising sites for intervention. For example, Smith was able to demonstrate that police responses to homosexual activities were shaped more by the legal framework in place than by homophobia, as some activists speculated. Institutional ethnography is often concerned with the ways that activity in one space is shaped by the activities of others, elsewhere—a phenomenon labeled *extra-local* social organization.

Postmodernism

The postmodern perspective rejects the Enlightenment’s faith in reason and rationality and the belief in progress (the label, which Richardson [1990b] described as oxymoronic, derives from it being post or after the philosophical era of modernism). Postmodernism comes from the field of literary criticism and streams within philosophy. It challenges the authority of science as well as the idea of an all-encompassing master narrative, and examines the ideological underpinnings behind any text, including those we call scientific.

Interest in postmodernism and related schools of thought such as post-structuralism in qualitative research coincided with the emergence of critical ethnography (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; J. Thomas, 1992). One could say that postmodern researchers take the idea of social construction to its limits, emphasizing the multiple truths that can be told in any situation. Like feminist researchers, some focus attention on how the researcher’s race, class, gender, and social position structure the production of ethnographic accounts or “texts.” Other postmodernist scholars deconstruct social science writing and hence strip the social scientist, whether quantitative or qualitative, of any claims to authority as an all-knowing observer of the social scene. J. Thomas (1992) offered a useful description of the postmodernist’s process of deconstruction by comparing it to taking a building apart and examining

its underlying structure (in the case of social science writing, assumptions, ideologies, and literary devices).

Some postmodernists have questioned the distinction between fiction and nonfiction (Atkinson, 1992; Denzin, 1996) and welcome a blurring of genres, or types, of writing. From this perspective, both fiction and nonfiction (ethnography, social science writing) are narratives and are based on literary devices such as metaphors and synecdoches (Richardson, 1990b). As Denzin (1996, p. 238) wrote, "the discourses of the postmodern world involve the constant commingling of literary, journalistic, fictional, factual, and ethnographic writing. No form is privileged over the other."

A series of exchanges between William F. Whyte and Norman Denzin in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (or *JCE*; 1992) and *Qualitative Inquiry* (1996) highlighted the differences between traditional qualitative research and the postmodern perspective. An entire issue of *JCE* (1992) was devoted to a reconsideration of Whyte's (1943, 1955, 1981, 1993) *Street Corner Society*. Widely considered a sociological classic in participant observation, Whyte's study made important contributions to our understanding of the social organization of lower-class urban areas and the social structure of small groups. Many years later, Marianne Boelen visited Cornerville, the site of Whyte's study, over an extended period of time and subsequently published a devastating critique of Whyte's study in *JCE* (Boelen, 1992), challenging his interpretations, conclusions, and ethics. Boelen's critique in *JCE* was followed by a rebuttal by Whyte; a strongly worded defense of Whyte by Angelo Ralph Orlandella, one of his original informants; and commentaries by sociologists Arthur Vidich, Laurel Richardson, and Norman Denzin.

The specifics of Boelen's charges against Whyte are less important than the issues raised in some of the commentaries in this exchange. Denzin's commentary on the Whyte-Boelen exchange was most instructive for understanding the postmodern stance. For Denzin, Whyte and Boelen were engaged in a hopelessly naive and outdated debate about who got the facts about Cornerville straight. Denzin (1992) wrote:

It is the hegemonic version that must be challenged, and Whyte and Boelen refuse to take up the challenge. They still want a world out there that proves their theory right or wrong. But how do they find that world and bring it into existence? How do they record what it does when they push against it? Unfortunately, they never answer these questions. Hence the poverty of their respective statements, for social realism will not produce the kinds of definitive statements they seek, nor will social realism furnish the political foundations for the projects they pursue. (p. 126)

In concluding his commentary, Denzin (1992) equated ethnographic reporting with positivism and questioned:

As the 20th century is now in its last decade, it is appropriate to ask if we any longer want this kind of social science. Do we want the kind of classic sociology that Whyte produced and Boelen, in her own negative way, endorses? (p. 131)

In Denzin's postmodern view, the task of the qualitative researcher is to produce provocative stories, which may or may not be definitive.

Whyte continued the discussion in the appendixes of the fourth edition of *Street Corner Society* (1993) and an article in *Qualitative Inquiry* (1996a) to which Richardson and Denzin responded. According to Whyte, some social phenomena are real. Whyte believed that Denzin failed to recognize the difference between description of facts and interpretation. Conceding that interpretations can be wrong, Whyte maintained that social and physical facts exist.

In an extended response to Whyte, Denzin (1996) argued that not only postmodernists but non-postmodern social constructionists have rejected Whyte's assumptions about the objective reality of social facts. Denzin proceeded to review the work of the "new journalists," which challenged the traditional distinctions between fact and fiction. In a terse rebuttal, Whyte (1996b) dismissed Denzin's view as a "fad" that "leads nowhere" (p. 242).

Some well-known qualitative researchers express discomfort over what Van Maanen (1995) referred to as this "new ethnographic turn" in the direction of the postmodern stance (also see Lofland, 1995). Some who defend postmodernism decry attempts to marginalize or politicize postmodern versions of qualitative research methods, yet call for a colonization of other versions of qualitative research:

The constructionists in the subfield believe that their methods will do the interpretation for them, yielding up empirical materials that will allow them to produce true and faithful accountings of this socially constructed world These are the tough-minded empiricists. They like closed and realist texts, certainly, foundational criteria, substantive theory, single-voiced texts, and good science canons. It is this version of QRM that we think should be colonized. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995, p. 353)

And some (Snow & Morrill, 1993, 1995) seem to recognize the value of having multiple voices on qualitative methods and perspectives.

Although much of postmodernist writing has been devoted to deconstructing published studies and challenging the truth claims of researchers, some postmodernists have attempted to contribute to social understanding through alternative forms of research and reporting. These forms are grounded in personal reflection and subjective understanding and include

autoethnography or biography (Denzin, 2013; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011), performance ethnography (Denzin, 2003), fiction (Badley, 2013), and poetry (Lahman, 2013; Peté, 2013; Phillips, 2013).

Narrative Analysis

Postmodernism has been quite controversial in the social sciences. Narrative analysis, however, is one of its manifestations that has been taken up and developed more enthusiastically (and, we would suggest, more productively) throughout the social sciences. Narrative analysts work with stories, especially those told in interviews and in everyday life. The central insight of narrative analysis is the recognition that people are constantly telling stories, to themselves and to others (Richardson, 1990a). Like the social constructionists and postmodernists, narrative analysts usually reject the idea of a single “capital-T” Truth. Instead, they are interested in how people narrate their own versions of reality. One early formulation of narrative analysis came in the work of the medical sociologist Elliott Mishler (1986). In his work with interviews, he noticed that the data often contained lengthy narrative responses to the interviewer’s questions. When researchers broke these stories into small pieces in their analyses, they often lost important aspects of the participant’s perspective. Mishler urged researchers, instead, to preserve the integrity of participant narratives and to analyze not only the content of the story but also how it is told. In psychology, Jerome Bruner (1987, 1990) provided a foundation for using narrative approaches to bring processes of meaning making to the forefront. Narrative methodologies often require a more focused analysis of a smaller number of participant responses, but narrative analysts believe that the closer, more holistic attention to the narrator’s perspective can provide extremely rich insights.

Narrative analysis refers to an extremely varied family of methodologies and a large tool kit of techniques for analysis. Narrative analysts may look at small stories told in everyday life, such as children’s playground stories (Labov, 1972); at lengthy narrative encounters, as in therapy sessions (McLeod & Lynch, 2000); at narratives told in interviews about particular experiences, such as divorce (Riessman, 1990) or the different ways that people use legal remedies for problems (Ewick & Silbey, 1998); at research participants’ written narratives (Emerson, 2011); or at narratives elicited around visual materials (Luttrell, 2003). Narrative analysis has been especially important in the study of illness and its consequences for identity (Charon, 2006; Frank, 1996), and narrative research is increasingly prominent in health-professional education. It has also been central to the development of critical race theory, which has emerged from legal studies (Bell, 1992). Researchers in this very broad tradition define narratives in different ways and adopt different methods for analyzing them (Riessman, 2008). What they have in common is an underlying view of the significance of narrative

and of the story as a “genre”—that is, a format for packaging (and making sense of) unruly experience.

The term *genre* comes from literature, where it is used to refer to different types of writing. When we pick up a novel or a book of poems or an autobiography, we know what to expect because these genre labels refer to different types of writing that are familiar to most readers. In the same way, the term *story* points to general expectations for the structuring of experience in narrative. (Most children learn quite early what will follow from “Once upon a time . . .”) Someone who tells a story will usually provide a brief opening, then recount a sequence of events (this happened, then this, then this), and then usually close with a coda that summarizes and points to the significance of the story. Narrative researchers often examine and interpret these structural aspects of people’s stories in order to understand how people make sense of their lives.

Multi-sited, Global Research

The processes and experiences associated with globalization have stimulated some qualitative researchers to develop theoretical perspectives that allow them to look at linkages and connections among field sites located in different settings or different parts of the world. Anthropologists have led the way in developing what they usually call *multi-sited ethnography*. In an early statement of goals and approaches, Marcus (1998, p. 79) discussed the idea of a “mobile ethnography” that can “examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space.” Researchers in various fields, interested in global labor markets and production processes, have used commodity chain analysis to look ethnographically at the journeys of particular items, when raw materials are mined or harvested in one part of the world, crafted into products somewhere else, and sent to consumers in yet another place. Ehrenreich and Hochschild and their colleagues (2002) have applied that idea in research on migrant nurses, nannies, and domestics, developing the idea of a “global care chain.” Michael Burawoy, a sociologist interested in using ethnography to extend existing theories, has developed a multi-sited “extended case method” (Burawoy et al., 1991; Burawoy, 2009), and he and a group of colleagues have applied those ideas in a variety of projects they collect under the label “global ethnography” (Burawoy et al., 2000).

Multi-sited ethnographic studies incorporate many of the same assumptions and use many of the same methodological tools as traditional ethnographies. However, they are usually based on very different understandings of the “field.” While traditional ethnographers have typically been rooted in some place (studying a street corner, for example, or a hospital ICU, or a social movement organization), those undertaking multi-sited ethnography might locate their field of inquiry in multiple places. For example, Banerjee’s (2006) study of Indian H1-B technology workers in the computer consulting

industry included data collection in the home country, brokering agencies, and worksites in the United States. Multi-sited researchers may also conceptualize their object of inquiry or unit of analysis differently. Martin's (1995) book on changing understandings of the immune system, *Flexible Bodies*, followed the idea of flexibility, investigating how it appears in interviews with lay people as well as scientists, and then showing parallels with constructions of flexibility in new theories of workplace management. Similarly, instead of looking at individual garment workers and asking how they understand their experience, anthropologist Jane Collins (2003) focused her research on the global system of garment production and fashion marketing.

Theorists of globalization debate whether the interconnections we see now are new or simply extensions of processes that have been ongoing for centuries. They also debate whether globalization is always a homogenizing process and the extent to which local people and communities can shape or resist the manifestations of globalization in their areas. Such theorizing opens intriguing new areas of investigation for qualitative researchers, inviting more international, multi-sited fieldwork, and we expect that global methods will continue to develop. As they grow, they illustrate how qualitative researchers rely on shared traditions from past work and also develop novel adaptations of those traditions in order to investigate changes in the social world. New methods for studying online behavior and social media, which we discuss further in the chapters to come, provide another, related example.

MAKING SENSE OF THEORETICAL DEBATES

Novices to qualitative research—and even some experienced researchers—can be confused by the array of theoretical perspectives available within the qualitative tradition. Just learning the language associated with certain perspectives can be a daunting task. Even more intimidating are polarized debates that pop up from time to time, forcing practitioners to believe that they have to declare allegiance to one camp or another.

Although Taylor and Bogdan identify with the traditions of the Chicago school and symbolic interactionism and DeVault identifies with these traditions as well as feminist research and institutional ethnography, we believe that much can be learned from other theoretical perspectives without sacrificing the core tenets of this perspective (Blumer's three premises). The experience of ethnomethodology is instructive in this regard. Soon after the development of this perspective by Harold Garfinkel (1967), proponents sought to establish ethnomethodology as distinctive from all hitherto established sociology; thus ethnomethodology was incompatible with symbolic interactionism. Yet, decades later, we find ethnomethodological approaches

and concepts appearing in studies rooted in other traditions. For example, West and Zimmerman's (1987) analysis of "doing gender" found its way into works identified with feminist research and symbolic interactionism. The success of ethnomethodology was represented not by its domination but through its incorporation into other ways of theorizing about the world. So, too, we believe, will postmodern notions such as deconstruction and the questioning of voice and authority leave a mark on the qualitative research scene by bringing these questions to the forefront.

That said, there are differences among the various theoretical perspectives that exist today. An appreciation of the differences, and where these differences lead, can be realized by addressing three questions: What is the relationship between the observer and the observed? Whose side are we on? Who cares about the research?

What Is the Relationship Between the Observer and the Observed?

Depending on their theoretical allegiances, qualitative researchers differ on the relationship between the observer (the subject or knower) and the observed (the object or what is known). At one extreme are those qualitative researchers who share with the positivists a belief that reality exists and can be more or less objectively known by an unbiased observer. In the exchange between Whyte and Denzin discussed previously, for example, Whyte held firm to the belief that social and physical facts can be objectively discovered and reported on by a conscientious researcher. At the other extreme are some postmodernists who believe that objective reality does not exist and that all knowledge is subjective and only subjective. Thus Denzin took the position that there is no difference between fact and fiction. From this perspective, ethnographic reporting has no greater claim to truth than any other version of reality. Ethnography becomes autobiography.

The views of most qualitative researchers fall somewhere between these two positions. Becker (1996) argued that qualitative researchers can honor, respect, and allow for the points of views of others even if they cannot claim to represent these with total accuracy:

All social scientists, implicitly or explicitly, attribute a point of view and interpretations to the people whose actions we analyze (Blumer, 1969). That is, we always describe how they interpret the events they participate in, so the only question is not whether we should, but how accurately we do it. We can find out, not with perfect accuracy, but better than zero, what people think they are doing, what meanings they give to the objects and events and people in their lives and experiences. (p. 58)

Within phenomenological, symbolic interactionist, and ethnomethodological perspectives, it is taken for granted that reality is socially constructed. Take the example of food and its preparation. Food seems, at first glance, to

be a fairly objective thing. If you do not eat and meet certain of the body's nutritional requirements, you die, no matter what your definition of the situation. Yet food, food preparation, and mealtimes are social constructions and phenomena. Religious belief systems revolve around what food can be eaten and how it can be prepared. Cultural definitions of health and beauty influence what people eat and how they think about food. Social customs surround how food is eaten and the proper behavior at mealtimes. Gender relations structure roles and responsibilities for feeding others (DeVault, 1991).

Now, everything we just said about the social construction of food and mealtimes is itself a social construction. It is one version of food told from one point of view and reflecting one set of interests. What we term *social constructions* might alternatively be viewed as conforming to God's will, good manners and proper etiquette, or the natural order of relations between women and men. Our definition of the situation is one out of many, but this does not mean that we cannot somewhat faithfully record and report on the cultural beliefs and practices surrounding food.

This is the phenomenological puzzle: As qualitative researchers, we develop social constructions of social constructions (and sometimes others come along and deconstruct our social constructions). Ethnomethodologists referred to this as reflexivity; the process is captured by Mehan and Wood (1975), who reprint Escher's famous "Drawing Hands" (in which two hands are shown, each drawing the other) in their ethnomethodology text. Most qualitative researchers accept the idea of reflexivity and take it for granted that the researcher's background and biography cannot be separated from his or her findings and interpretations (Tracy, 2013).

Merging the postmodernists' skepticism of the authority of the researcher's version of reality with a progressive impulse, Richardson (1990a) provided a useful analysis of the nature of qualitative knowledge:

Sociological discovery, generally, happens through finding out about people's lives from the people themselves—listening to how people experience their lives and frame their worlds, working inductively, rather than deductively. Qualitative researchers, generally, learn about other people through interaction in specified roles, such as participant observer/informant, interviewee/interviewer, and so on. As a result, their knowledge of people's lives is always historically and temporally grounded. Most ethnographers are keenly aware that knowledge of the world they enter is partial, situated, and subjective knowledge. (p. 28)

In contemporary qualitative research, reflexivity is seen as an important part of the research process; researchers often keep notes and memos that are meant to increase their awareness of how the research process has been shaped by their own identities, histories, roles, and expectations, as well as the social and political context for the research (Presser, 2005).

Whose Side Are We On?

Qualitative research methods are ideally suited to examining the world from different points of view. As we have noted, there is no inherent hierarchy of credibility in qualitative research. All perspectives are valuable in the sense that there is something to be learned from them. For this reason, qualitative research and ethnography have been accused of being apolitical and upholding the status quo (J. Thomas, 1992).

Theoretical perspectives such as critical ethnography and feminist research highlight the importance of analyzing and presenting reality from the vantage point of powerless people in society. Feminist research develops theory, or tells the research story, from the historically neglected perspective of women. Critical ethnography and certain versions of postmodernism do not merely present the points of view of powerless people—the marginalized or oppressed—but challenge traditional authority structures.

Research can never be values-free (Gouldner, 1970). Values determine what we study, how we understand our data, and how we present our findings. Although qualitative researchers must seek to understand all perspectives, they must eventually decide from whose vantage point to write their studies. To refuse to give greater weight to one vantage point over another is, in fact, to leave the prevailing point of view unchallenged. This is a values position and a political decision in itself.

Within the qualitative tradition, the idea that researchers should side with powerless members of society is not new. Becker's (1967) essay "Whose Side Are We On?" presented a compelling rationale for presenting the perspectives of certain groups of people. According to Becker, we must necessarily present reality from someone's point of view. Becker argued that since powerful people have many means at their disposal to present their versions of reality, we should side with society's underdogs, the powerless.

In a similar vein, C. Wright Mills (1959) admonished social scientists to accept their political responsibility to help people understand their "personal troubles," problems experienced as individual and idiosyncratic, as social issues confronting others as well. Mills (1959) wrote:

Whether or not they are aware of them, men in mass society are gripped by personal troubles which they are not able to turn into social issues. They do not understand the interplay of these personal troubles of their milieu with problems of social structure . . . It is the political task of the social scientist . . . continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals. (p. 187)

Today, many, if not most qualitative researchers share a commitment to social justice and attempt to design studies to contribute to greater social equality (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Who Cares About the Research?

The final question, “Who cares?” relates to the purpose of research and theorizing. As sociologists, we are interested in understanding social life and culture. Yet much of our research has been conducted in the applied fields of education, human services, and disability studies and explored gender, race, and disability in society. How can our theories and research improve the human condition, if only on a small scale? The most elegant and liberating theory does not interest us if it can only be understood by a small group of like-speaking people and cannot be translated into terms meaningful to people confronting problems in their everyday lives. As Marshall and Rossman (2011, p. 5) pointed out, qualitative researchers should answer the “So what?” question in their studies.

The divide between so-called basic and applied research is not insurmountable. Qualitative research sometimes finds its way to broader audiences. Richardson’s (1985, 1990b) feminist research was published not only in sociological journals but also in a trade book written for a popular audience. Even theories developed for a sociological audience can have a profound influence in applied fields and practice. In the field of disability studies generally and intellectual disability specifically, for example, Becker’s (1963) labeling theory of deviance and Goffman’s (1961, 1963) analyses of total institutions and stigma not only have inspired research in these areas but have been extremely influential in the evolution of policy and practice. The trend of deinstitutionalization is due, in no small part, to an understanding of the social construction of disability, stereotyping and the stigma of the disability label, and the devastating effects on the self of confinement in total institutions (Taylor, 2009). Conversely, research conducted for applied or evaluation purposes can sometimes yield sociological insights and understandings (Bogdan & Taylor, 1990).

In this book we describe qualitative research methods from the vantage point of the tradition of this approach in sociology and related social science disciplines. We are also interested in how research and theories can be applied to issues and problems experienced by people outside of the social sciences.

In this chapter we have attempted to give a sense of some of the methodological and theoretical dimensions of qualitative research. The remainder of this book covers data collection, data analysis, and writing in qualitative research. Part One deals with how to conduct qualitative research. We discuss participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and a host of creative qualitative approaches. Our intent here is not to offer recipes for conducting qualitative research. Rather, our purpose is to present some conventions that qualitative researchers have developed and to discuss how some researchers have dealt with the issues and dilemmas that arise in qualitative research. In a sense, we present an ethnomethodology of qualitative research—a description of the methodology of some people who conduct qualitative

research—based on certain traditions as well as our own experience and that of the students and others with whom we have worked. In Part Two we consider the presentation of findings in qualitative research and offer a series of articles based on qualitative data. After a concluding note, we include samples of field notes and a template for developing an interview guide in the appendixes, as well as the references list for Chapters 1 through 7.

NOTES

1. Although the distinction between positivism and phenomenology reflects the theoretical traditions in the social sciences, some commentators distinguish between variations of these two approaches. For example, Guba and Lincoln (2004) identified four paradigms in qualitative research: positivism (reality exists and can be known by the observer); postpositivism (reality exists but can only be imperfectly apprehended); critical theory (reality is shaped by political, economic, ethnic, gender, and other factors); and constructivism (reality can be apprehended through mental constructions held by individuals and groups).
2. Sic! Sic! Throughout this book, we quote authors who, writing in a different era, used masculine pronouns and male-dominated language. So as not to disrupt the flow of the quote, we have decided not to use *sic* each time male-dominated language is quoted. Further, we have resisted the temptation to change male-dominated language in quotations, since this language serves as a reminder of who was doing the writing and their assumptions about the world.
3. Even a cursory review of the qualitative literature over the past several decades yields an incredible number of new theoretical frameworks: a sociology of the absurd, reflexive sociology, post-structuralism, post-foundationalism, dramaturgy, critical ethnography, queer theory, critical race theory, interpretative biography, critical theory, standpoint theory, deconstructionism, ethnic modeling, critical hermeneutics, existential sociology, and so on. A review of all of these perspectives is beyond our interests and the scope of this book. Here we review some major frameworks that have been influential in recent theorizing in qualitative research.