# 6 Qualitative Research

To answer some research questions, we cannot skim across the surface. We must dig deep to get a complete understanding of the phenomenon we are studying. In qualitative research, we do indeed dig deep: We collect numerous forms of data and examine them from various angles to construct a rich and meaningful picture of a complex, multifaceted situation.

The term **qualitative research** encompasses several approaches to research that are in some respects quite different from one another. Yet all qualitative approaches have two things in common. First, they focus on phenomena that occur in natural settings—that is, in the "real world." And second, they involve capturing and studying the complexity of those phenomena. Qualitative researchers rarely try to simplify what they observe. Instead, they recognize that the issue they are studying has many dimensions and layers, and they try to portray it in its multifaceted form.

As noted in Chapter 1, most researchers strive for objectivity in their research. They believe their observations should be influenced as little as possible by any perceptions, impressions, and biases they may have. By maintaining objectivity, they hope to maximize their chances of determining the ultimate Truth of which we spoke in Chapter 4. In contrast, some qualitative researchers—certainly not all of them—argue against this objectivity principle. Although objective methods may be appropriate for studying events in the physical world, these researchers say, an objective approach to studying human events—interpersonal relationships, social structures, creative products, and so on—is neither desirable nor, perhaps, even possible (e.g., Creswell, 2009; Eisner, 1998; Wolcott, 1994). From this perspective, the researcher's ability to interpret and make sense of what he or she observes is critical for understanding any social phenomenon. In a sense, *the researcher is an instrument* in much the same way that an oscilloscope, sociogram, or rating scale is an instrument.

Furthermore, some qualitative researchers believe that there isn't necessarily a single, ultimate Truth to be discovered. Instead, there may be multiple perspectives held by different individuals, with each of these perspectives potentially having equal validity, or truth (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1988). One goal of a qualitative study, then, might be to reveal the nature of these multiple perspectives.

Qualitative research can be found in many academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, biology, history, political science, education, and medicine. In some disciplines, such as psychology and education, qualitative approaches were once frowned on (largely because of their subjective nature) and have only recently gained wide acceptance as legitimate research. Yet we should hardly think of qualitative research as being "new" or "modern." In fact, many researchers believe that all inquiry starts out in a qualitative form (e.g., Lauer & Asher, 1988). When little information exists on a topic, when variables are unknown, when a relevant theory base is inadequate or missing, a qualitative study can help define what is important—that is, *what needs to be studied.* The field of medicine, as one example, makes extensive use of qualitative methods when unique or puzzling cases are first observed. Biologists' efforts to classify newly observed species, create taxonomies, and describe the social behaviors of primates and certain other animal species are largely qualitative efforts. Many analyses of historical data are almost entirely qualitative. And social scientists often look subjectively for patterns in the complex phenomena they observe, sometimes using qualitative methods exclusively and sometimes combining qualitative and quantitative methods into a *mixed-methods design* (more on mixed-methods research in Chapter 10).

In this chapter we give you a general idea of what qualitative research is and what it strives to accomplish, with a particular focus on studies of human beings and their creations. Included in the chapter are descriptions of five kinds of qualitative studies: case studies, ethnographies, phenomenological studies, grounded theory studies, and content analyses. We describe a sixth kind, historical research, in Chapter 7.

## The Nature of the Research Problem and Planning in Qualitative Research

In Chapter 2 we emphasized the importance of pinning down the problem with utmost precision. But here, too, we sometimes find an exception in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers often formulate only general research problems and ask only general questions about the phenomenon they are studying. For example, they might ask, What is the nature of the culture of people living in Samoa? or What is it like to live with someone who has Alzheimer's disease? Such research problems and questions do not remain so loosely defined, however. As a study proceeds, the qualitative researcher gains increasing understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and so becomes increasingly able to ask more specific questions—and occasionally can formulate and test specific hypotheses as well.

Because qualitative researchers tend to ask open-ended questions at the beginning of an investigation, they sometimes have difficulty identifying—at the outset—the exact methods they will use. Initially, they may select only a general approach suitable for their purpose, perhaps choosing a case study, ethnography, or content analysis. As they learn more about what they are studying and can thereby ask more specific questions, so, too, can they better specify what methods they should use to answer those questions.

The methodology in a qualitative study, then, may continue to evolve over the course of the investigation. Despite this fact, we must emphasize that *qualitative research requires considerable preparation and planning.* The researcher must be well trained in observation techniques, interview strategies, and whatever other data collection methods are likely to be necessary to address the research problem. The researcher must have a firm grasp of previous research related to the problem so that he or she knows what to look for and can separate important information from unimportant details in what he or she observes (some grounded theory studies are exceptions, for reasons you will discover shortly). And the researcher must be adept at wading through huge amounts of data and finding a meaningful order in what, to someone else, might appear to be chaos. For these reasons, a qualitative study can be a challenging task indeed. It is definitely *not* the approach to take if you're looking for quick results and easy answers.

## When to Choose a Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research studies typically serve one or more of the following purposes (Peshkin, 1993):

- *Description.* They can reveal the multifaceted nature of certain situations, settings, processes, relationships, systems, or people.
- *Interpretation.* They enable a researcher to (a) gain new insights about a particular phenomenon, (b) develop new concepts or theoretical perspectives about the phenomenon, and/or (c) discover problems that exist within the phenomenon.
- *Verification.* They allow a researcher to test the validity of certain assumptions, claims, theories, or generalizations within real-world contexts.
- *Evaluation.* They provide a means through which a researcher can judge the effectiveness of particular policies, practices, or innovations.

As a general rule, qualitative studies do *not* allow the researcher to identify cause-and-effect relationships—to answer questions such as What caused what? or Why did such-and-such happen? You will need quantitative research, especially experimental studies, to answer questions of this kind.

## Qualitative Research Designs

In this section, we describe five common qualitative research designs. We give you enough information to help you determine whether one of these approaches might be suitable for your research question, and we briefly describe the specific nature of the method, data analysis, and research report for each design. Later in the chapter, we discuss data collection strategies and data analysis strategies that are more broadly applicable to qualitative designs.

A single chapter cannot cover everything you would need to know to carry out a solid qualitative research project. Should you choose to conduct a qualitative study, we urge you to take advantage of the resources listed in the "For Further Reading" section at the end of the chapter.

Remember, too, that of all the designs we describe in this book, qualitative research methods are the least prescriptive (Eisner, 1998). There are no magic formulas, no cookbook recipes for conducting a qualitative study. This book, as well as any others you may read, can give you only general guidelines based on the experiences of those qualitative researchers who have gone before you. In a qualitative study, the specific methods you use will ultimately be constrained only by the limits of your imagination.

## Case Study

In a **case study**—sometimes called *idiographic research*—a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time. For example, a medical researcher might study the nature, course, and treatment of a rare illness for a particular patient. An educator might study and analyze the instructional strategies that a master teacher uses to teach high school history. A political scientist might study the origins and development of a politician's campaign as he or she runs for public office. Case studies are common not only in medicine, education, and political science, but also in law, psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Sometimes researchers focus on a single case, perhaps because its unique or exceptional qualities can promote understanding or inform practice for similar situations. At other times researchers study two or more cases—often cases that are either similar or different in certain key ways—to make comparisons, build theory, or propose generalizations; such an approach is called a *multiple* or *collective* case study.

A case study may be especially suitable for learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation. It can also be appropriate for investigating how an individual or program changes over time, perhaps as the result of certain conditions or interventions. In either circumstance, it is useful for generating or providing preliminary support for hypotheses. Its major weakness is that, especially when only a single case is involved, we cannot be sure that the findings are generalizable to other situations.

**Method.** In a case study, the researcher collects extensive data on the individual(s), program(s), or event(s) on which the investigation is focused. These data often include observations, interviews, documents (e.g., newspaper articles), past records (e.g., previous test scores), and audiovisual materials (e.g., photographs, videotapes, audiotapes). In many case studies, the researcher may spend an extended period of time on site and interact regularly with the person or people being studied.

The researcher also records details about the context surrounding the case, including information about the physical environment and any historical, economic, and social factors that have bearing on the situation. By identifying the context of the case, the researcher helps others who later read the research report to draw conclusions about the extent to which the study's findings might be generalizable to other situations.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis in a case study typically involves the following steps (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1995):

1. *Organization of details about the case.* The specific "facts" about the case are arranged in a logical (e.g., chronological) order.

2. *Categorization of data.* Categories are identified to help cluster the data into meaningful groups. (For instance, a researcher studying the course of a political campaign might think in terms of "campaign strategies," "fund-raising activities," "news media accounts," "setbacks," etc.)
3. *Interpretation of single instances.* Specific documents, occurrences, and other bits of data are examined for the specific meanings that they might have in relation to the case.
4. *Identification of patterns.* The data and their interpretations are scrutinized for underlying themes and other patterns that characterize the case more broadly than a single piece of information can reveal.
5. *Synthesis and generalizations.* An overall portrait of the case is constructed. Conclusions are drawn that may have implications beyond the specific case that has been studied.

Especially when only a single case is studied, any generalizations made are, of course, tentative and must await further support from other studies—perhaps from additional case studies, other kinds of qualitative studies, or experimental research.

A case study researcher often begins the data analysis process during data collection; preliminary conclusions are likely to influence the kinds of data he or she seeks out and collects in later parts of the study. Ultimately the researcher must look for convergence *(triangulation)* of the data: Many separate pieces of information must all point to the same conclusion.

**The research report.** If you conduct a case study, you will probably want to include the following in your report:

1. *A rationale for studying the case.* Explain why the case was worthy of in-depth study—in other words, how it will significantly advance human beings' knowledge about some aspect of the world.
2. *A detailed description of the facts related to the case.* Describe the specific individual(s), program(s), or event(s) you studied, as well as the setting and any other uncontested facts about the case. Your description should be as thorough and objective as possible.
3. *A description of the data you collected.* Tell your readers what observations you made, whom you interviewed, what documents you examined, and so on.
4. *A discussion of the patterns you found.* Describe any trends, themes, personality characteristics, and so on, that the data suggest. At this point, you are going beyond the facts themselves to your *interpretation* of the facts. Support each pattern you identify with sufficient evidence to convince the reader that the pattern does, in fact, accurately portray the data. If some data contradict the patterns you propose, however, you should describe those as well. *Even though you are interpreting as well as reporting data, you want to present as complete and unbiased an account of the case as you possibly can.*
5. *A connection to the larger scheme of things.* In some way, you need to answer the question, So what? In what way does the case study contribute to our collective knowledge about some aspect of the world or human experience? The connection(s) you make here might take one or more of several forms. You might compare the case with other, previously reported cases and note similarities and dissimilarities. You might argue that the case either supports or disconfirms an existing hypothesis or theory. Or you might use the case to support your contention that a particular intervention—perhaps a medical treatment, teaching method, or campaign strategy—can be a highly effective one.

## Ethnography

In a case study, the researcher looks in considerable depth at a particular person, program, or event. In contrast, in an **ethnography**, the researcher looks in depth at an *entire group*—more specifically, a group that shares a common culture. (The word *ethnography* comes from *ethnos,* Greek for "a nation or other close-knit group of people," and *graph,* "something written or recorded.") The ethnographic researcher studies a group in its natural setting for a lengthy time period, often several months or several years. The focus of investigation is on the everyday behaviors of the people in the group (e.g., interactions, language, rituals), with an intent to identify

cultural norms, beliefs, social structures, and other patterns. Ideally the ethnographic researcher identifies not only explicit cultural patterns—those readily acknowledged by group members or easily observable in objects or behaviors—but also *implicit* patterns—those beliefs and assumptions that have such a below-the-surface, taken-for-granted quality that even group members aren't always consciously aware of them.

Ethnographies were first used in cultural anthropology, but they are now seen in sociology, psychology, education, and marketing research as well. The conception of the type of "culture" that can be studied has also changed over time: Whereas ethnographies once focused on long-standing cultural groups (e.g., people living on the island of Samoa), more recently they have been used to study such "cultures" as those of adult work environments, elementary school classrooms, violent adolescent groups, and Internet-based communities (e.g., Bender, 2001; Kozinets, 2010; McGibbon, Peter, & Gallop, 2010; Mehan, 1979).[1]

An ethnography is especially useful for gaining an understanding of the complexities of a particular sociocultural group. It allows considerable flexibility in the methods used to obtain information, which can be either an advantage (to the astute researcher who knows what to look for) or a disadvantage (to the novice who may be overwhelmed and distracted by unimportant details). Hence, if you decide that an ethnography is the approach most suitable for your research problem, we urge you to get a solid grounding in cultural anthropology before you venture into the field (Creswell, 2007).

**Method.** Site-based fieldwork is the *sine qua non*—the essence—of any ethnography. Prolonged engagement in the group's natural setting gives the researcher time to observe and record processes that would be almost impossible to learn about by using any other approach.

The first step in an ethnographic study is to gain access to a site appropriate for answering the researcher's general research problem or question. Ideally, the site should be one in which the researcher is a "stranger" and has no vested interest in the outcome of the study. A site that the researcher knows well (perhaps one that involves close acquaintances) may be more accessible and convenient, but by being so close to the situation, the researcher may have trouble looking at it with sufficient detachment to gain a balanced perspective and portray an accurate picture of the processes observed (Creswell, 2007).

To gain access to a site, the researcher must often go through a **gatekeeper**, a person who can provide a smooth entrance into the site. This individual might be a tribal chief in a community in a developing country, a principal or teacher in a school or classroom, or a program director at a homeless shelter. Then, after gaining entry into the site, the researcher must establish rapport with and gain the trust of the people being studied. At the same time, the researcher must be open about why he or she is there. The principle of *informed consent* described in Chapter 4 is just as essential in an ethnography as it is in any other type of research.

Initially, the researcher casts a broad net, intermingling with everyone and getting an overall sense of the social and cultural context. Gradually, the researcher identifies **key informants** who can provide information and insights relevant to the research question and can facilitate contacts with other helpful individuals.

In some ethnographic studies, the researcher engages in **participant observation**, becoming immersed in the daily life of the people. In fact, over the course of the study, the researcher's role may gradually change from "outsider" to "insider." The advantage here is that the researcher might gain insights about the group and its behaviors that could not be obtained in any other way. The disadvantage is that he or she may become so emotionally involved as to lose the ability to assess the situation accurately. In some situations, the researcher may even "go native," joining the group and therefore becoming unable to complete the study (Creswell, 2007).

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher is a careful observer, interviewer, and listener. Furthermore, he or she takes extensive field notes (written either on site at the time or in private later in the day) in the forms of dialogues, diagrams, maps, and so forth. Lengthy conversations and significant events can be recorded using audiotapes and videotapes. The researcher may also

[1] See Kraut and colleagues (2004) for a good discussion of the research possibilities, potential pitfalls, and ethical issues related to studying people's postings on the Internet.

collect artifacts (e.g., tools, ritualistic implements, artistic creations) and records (e.g., accounting ledgers, personal journals, lesson plans) from the group. In order to test hypotheses about a group's unconsciously shared beliefs or assumptions, some ethnographic researchers occasionally conduct *breaching experiments*—that is, they intentionally behave in ways they suspect might violate an unspoken social rule—and observe people's reactions (Mehan & Wood, 1975).

We must caution you that conducting a good ethnography requires both considerable patience and considerable tolerance. One experienced ethnographer has described the process this way:

> It requires a great patience under any circumstances for me to "sit and visit." A rather inevitable consequence of being inquisitive without being a talker is that my conversational queries usually prompt others to do the talking. During fieldwork, I make a conscious effort to be sociable, thus providing opportunities for people to talk to me. My work ethic takes over to help me become not only more social but more attentive and responsive, and out pour the informants' stories and explanations so essential to good fieldwork.
>
> (Parenthetically, I note my suspicion that many fieldworkers talk too much and hear too little. They become their own worst enemy by becoming their own best informant. . . .)
>
> . . . I never confront informants with contradictions, blatant disbelief, or shock, but I do not mind presenting myself as a bit dense, someone who does not catch on too quickly and has to have things explained. . . . (Wolcott, 1994, p. 348)

**Data analysis.** As is true in case study research, data collection and data analysis in an ethnographic study often occur somewhat simultaneously. The analysis typically proceeds in the following sequence (Wolcott, 1994):

1. *Description.* The information obtained is organized into a logical structure. Ethnographers have used a variety of strategies to organize and describe the groups they have observed, including the following:
   - Describing events in chronological order
   - Describing a typical day in the life of the group or of an individual within the group
   - Focusing on a critical event for the group
   - Developing a story, complete with plot and characters
2. *Analysis.* The data are categorized according to their meanings. Patterns, regularities, and critical events are identified.
3. *Interpretation.* The general nature of the group and its practices is inferred from the categories, meanings, and patterns identified in Step 2. Existing theoretical frameworks in one's discipline may lend structure and support during the interpretation process.

Experienced ethnographers readily admit that it is virtually impossible—and perhaps not even desirable—to analyze their data with total objectivity. Wolcott (1994) has proposed that the researcher should instead strive for *rigorous subjectivity;* to achieve this end, he has suggested, the researcher should aim for balance, fairness, completeness, and sensitivity in the final analysis and interpretation of the data. Even so, any researcher conducting an ethnographic study must continually acknowledge—both to self and to others—that personal attitudes and opinions are inevitably creeping into and biasing observations and interpretations.

**The research report.** The final report for an ethnography may or may not be written in the impersonal style that is typical for many other forms of research. Sometimes it is, instead, a personal, literary narrative designed to engage the reader's attention and interest. Some experienced ethnographers are storytellers as much as they are scholars and researchers.

When you write about an ethnographic study, you will want to include the following information:

1. *An introduction that provides a rationale and context for the study.* Present your research question at the beginning of the report (at this point in the book, such a suggestion should hardly be a surprise!), and describe the nature of your study as it relates both to your question and to one or more theoretical perspectives. More generally, explain why the study was an important one for you to conduct and for others to read about.

2. *A description of the setting and methods.* Describe the group you studied and the methods you used to study it. Go into considerable detail about what people do and say, how they interact with one another, what systems and rituals they have in place, and so on. In other words, engage in the *thick description* described in Chapter 4. Ideally, an ethnographic report should "place the reader figuratively in the setting . . . transport the reader to the actual scene . . . make it real" (Creswell, 2012, p. 472).
3. *An analysis of the group studied.* Describe the patterns and themes you observed (e.g., the stated or unstated norms and conventions for behavior, the social hierarchy, the belief system). Present evidence (e.g., descriptions of artifacts, conversations with group members) to support your claims. To the extent that different group members have different perspectives, you should present those perspectives. Use the participants' actual words—perhaps including their language or dialect as well—to give your account realism and "life." Ethnographers give their research participants *voice:* They often use participants' own words to convey a sense of what it is like to live and work within the group.
4. *A conclusion.* Relate your findings to your research question and to concepts, theories, and previous research in your discipline. In the process, also be explicit about how your background and perspectives may have colored your analysis and conclusions.

Although it may be impossible for you to be completely objective when you describe the group you have studied, you should nevertheless conscientiously try to avoid making judgments. Even small changes in wording can make a significant difference in this regard. For instance, rather than saying, "Only one villager had ever graduated from high school," you might say, "One villager had graduated from high school" (Wolcott, 1994, pp. 352–353). And rather than saying, "Few pupils were at task," you might instead say, "Five pupils appeared to be engaged in the assignment" (Wolcott, 1994, p. 353). Such words as *only* and *few* can imply such meanings as "insufficient" or "disappointing"—value judgments that an impartial researcher tries to avoid.

Ultimately you want to construct an in-depth portrait of a sociocultural group in all its complexities. Your portrait should give your readers a better understanding of the culture and help them look at it from the perspectives of the group's members.

## Phenomenological Study

In its broadest sense, the term *phenomenology* refers to a person's perception of the meaning of an event, as opposed to the event as it exists external to the person. A **phenomenological study** is a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions, perspectives, and understandings of a particular situation. In other words, a phenomenological study tries to answer the question, What is it like to experience such-and-such? For instance, a researcher might study the experiences of people caring for a chronically or terminally ill relative, living in an abusive relationship, or home-schooling a child.

In some cases, the researcher has had personal experience related to the phenomenon in question and wants to gain a better understanding of the experiences of others. By looking at multiple perspectives on the same situation, the researcher can then make some generalizations of *what something is like* from an insider's perspective.

### Method.

Phenomenological researchers depend almost exclusively on lengthy interviews (perhaps 1 to 2 hours in length) with a carefully selected sample of participants. A typical sample size is from 5 to 25 individuals, all of whom have had direct experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The actual implementation of a phenomenological study is as much in the hands of the participants as in the hands of the researcher. The phenomenological interview is often a very unstructured one in which the researcher and participants work together to "arrive at the heart of the matter" (Tesch, 1994, p. 147). The researcher listens closely as participants describe their everyday experiences related to the phenomenon; the researcher must also be alert for subtle yet meaningful cues in participants' expressions, pauses, questions, and occasional sidetracks.

A typical interview looks more like an informal conversation, with the participant doing most of the talking and the researcher doing most of the listening.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher suspends any preconceived notions or personal experiences that may unduly influence what the researcher "hears" the participants saying. Such suspension—sometimes called *bracketing* or *epoché*—can be extremely difficult for a researcher who has personally experienced the phenomenon under investigation. Yet it is essential if the researcher is to gain an understanding of the typical experiences that people have had.

**Data analysis.** The central task during data analysis is to identify common themes in people's descriptions of their experiences. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher typically takes steps such as the following (e.g., Creswell, 2007):

1. *Identify statements that relate to the topic.* The researcher separates relevant from irrelevant information in the interview and then breaks the relevant information into small segments (e.g., phrases or sentences) that each reflect a single, specific thought.
2. *Group statements into "meaning units."* The researcher groups the segments into categories that reflect the various aspects ("meanings") of the phenomenon as it is experienced.
3. *Seek divergent perspectives.* The researcher looks for and considers the various ways in which different people experience the phenomenon.
4. *Construct a composite.* The researcher uses the various meanings identified to develop an overall description of the phenomenon as people typically experience it.

The final result is a general description of the phenomenon as seen through the eyes of people who have experienced it firsthand. The focus is on common themes in the experience but also with consideration of diversity in the individuals and settings studied.

**The research report.** There is no specific structure for reporting a phenomenological study. As is true for virtually any form of research, you will want to present the research problem or question, describe your methods of data collection and analysis, draw a conclusion about the phenomenon you have studied (in the form of a composite of your participants' experiences), relate your findings to an existing body of theory and research, and discuss any practical implications of your findings. Your report should be sufficiently vivid that your readers come away feeling that "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

## Grounded Theory Study

Of all the research designs we describe in this book, a **grounded theory study** is the one *least* likely to begin from a particular theoretical framework. On the contrary, the major purpose of a grounded theory approach is to *begin with the data and use them to develop a theory.* The term *grounded* refers to the idea that the theory that emerges from the study is derived from and rooted in data that have been collected in the field rather than taken from the research literature. Grounded theory studies are especially helpful when current theories about a phenomenon are either inadequate or nonexistent.[2]

Typically, a grounded theory study focuses on a *process* related to a particular topic—including people's actions and interactions—with the ultimate goal of developing a theory about that process. The approach has its roots in sociology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) but is now also used in such fields as anthropology, geography, education, nursing, psychology, and social work. It has been used effectively for a wide range of topics—for instance, to study children's eating habits, college students' thoughts and feelings during classroom discussions, and workers' stress levels in public service agencies (Do & Schallert, 2004; Kime, 2008; Skagert, Dellve, Eklöf, Pousette, & Ahlborg, 2008).

[2]Some researchers associate grounded theory studies with a particular method of data analysis—in particular, that of Corbin and Strauss (2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1990)—and suggest the term *emergent theory* as a broader, less prescriptive label for this approach (e.g., Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010).

Virtually all experts agree that a grounded theory researcher should have a firm grasp of general concepts and theoretical orientations in his or her discipline as a whole; hence, an in-depth literature review early in the process is essential. However, experts disagree about whether the researcher should look closely at previous findings *directly related to the present research problem* before collecting and analyzing data. For example, Glaser (1978) has argued that too much advance knowledge of earlier research regarding a topic may limit a researcher's ability to be open-minded about how to analyze and interpret his or her own data. In contrast, many others suggest that the advantages of conducting a relatively thorough literature review outweigh the disadvantages; in particular, previous works and writings about a topic can often help a researcher think more clearly and insightfully about the data collected (e.g., Hesse-Biber, 2010; Jaccard & Jacoby, 2010). Our own advice is to learn as much as you can about your research topic through a thorough review of the related literature but *to refrain from forming specific hypotheses about what you yourself might find.*

**Method.** As is true for the qualitative designs previously described, data collection is field-based, flexible, and likely to change over the course of the study. Interviews typically play a major role in data collection, but observations, documents, historical records, videotapes, and anything else of potential relevance to the research question might also be used. The only restriction is that the data collected *must* include the perspectives and voices of the people being studied (Charmaz, 2002, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Data analysis begins almost immediately, at which point the researcher develops *categories* to classify the data. Subsequent data collection is aimed at *saturating* the categories—in essence, learning as much about them as possible—and at finding any disconfirming evidence that may suggest revisions in the categories identified or in interrelationships among them. This process of moving back and forth between data collection and data analysis, with data analysis driving later data collection, is sometimes called the **constant comparative method**. The theory that ultimately evolves is one that includes numerous concepts and interrelationships among those concepts; in other words, it has *conceptual density* (Schram, 2006).

**Data analysis.** Experts disagree about the best approach to analyzing data in a grounded theory study (e.g., see Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1992). One widely used approach is that proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; also see Neuman, 2011), who suggest the following steps:

1. *Open coding.* The data are divided into segments and then scrutinized for commonalities that reflect categories or themes. After the data are categorized, they are further examined for *properties*—specific attributes or subcategories—that characterize each category. In general, open coding is a process of reducing the data to a small set of themes that appear to describe the phenomenon under investigation.
2. *Axial coding.* Interconnections are made among categories and subcategories. Here the focus is on determining more about each category in terms of
   - The conditions that give rise to it
   - The context in which it is embedded
   - The strategies people use to manage it or carry it out
   - The consequences of those strategies

   The researcher moves back and forth among data collection, open coding, and axial coding, continually refining the categories and their interconnections—and perhaps combining or subdividing some of the categories—as additional data are collected.
3. *Selective coding.* The categories and their interrelationships are combined to create a *story line* that describes "what happens" in the phenomenon being studied.
4. *Development of a theory.* A theory, in the form of a verbal statement, visual model, or series of hypotheses, is offered to explain the phenomenon in question. The theory depicts the evolving nature of the phenomenon and describes how certain conditions lead to certain actions or interactions, how those actions or interactions lead to *other* actions, and so on, with the typical sequence of events being laid out. No matter what form the theory takes, *it is based entirely on the data collected.*

We have described these steps only in the most general terms. Corbin and Strauss's *Basics of Qualitative Research* (2008) offers more specific guidance and some helpful examples.

The steps just listed provide a structured and relatively systematic way of boiling down a huge body of data into a concise conceptual framework that describes and explains a particular phenomenon; as such, it has a semblance of rigor and objectivity that many researchers find appealing. Yet in some experts' eyes, these steps are *too* structured, to the point that they limit a researcher's flexibility and may predispose the researcher to identify categories prematurely (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 1992). Should you decide that a grounded theory study is the best way to tackle your research problem, we urge you to read diverse descriptions of the form that such a study might take (e.g., see Charmaz, 2000, 2002, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1992).

**The research report.** The style of writing used to describe a grounded theory study is typically objective and impersonal. Building on Creswell's (2007) recommendations, we suggest that you include the following in your report:

1. *A description of the research question.* Describe your general research problem and explain how you delineated it more precisely over the course of the study.
2. *A review of the related literature.* Do *not* use the literature to provide the specific categories or themes for coding your data, but *do* use it to provide a rationale and context for your study.
3. *A description of your methodology and data analysis.* Describe the approach you took at the beginning of the study and how your approach evolved over time. Outline the nature of the sample and setting, as well as the specific methods (interviews, observations, etc.) you used. Explain the categories and properties you identified. Describe how your data collection was driven by your data analysis.
4. *A presentation of your theory.* Present the theory you have developed in a verbal or visual form, or, even better, both verbally and visually. Use some of your actual data (e.g., excerpts from interviews) to illustrate and support the theory.
5. *A discussion of implications.* Show how your theory is similar to or dissimilar from other theoretical perspectives. Explain how it relates to existing knowledge about the topic. Discuss potential implications of the theory for practice or future research.

## Content Analysis

A **content analysis** is a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases. Content analyses are typically performed on *forms of human communication,* including books, newspapers, personal journals, legal documents, films, television, art, music, videotapes of human interactions, transcripts of conversations, and Internet blog and bulletin board entries.[3] For instance, a researcher might use a content analysis to determine what religious symbols appear in works of art, in what various activities teachers spend their time in the classroom, or what attitudes are reflected in the speeches or newspaper articles of a particular era in history. As you might infer from these examples, content analyses are found in a wide variety of disciplines, including psychology, history, art, education, journalism, and political science.

Of the five designs described in this chapter, a content analysis involves the greatest amount of planning at the front end of the project. The researcher typically defines a specific research problem or question at the very beginning (e.g., "Do contemporary children's books reflect traditional gender stereotypes?", "What religious symbols appeared in early Byzantine architecture, and with what frequency, during the years 527–867?"). The researcher also identifies the sample to be studied and the method of analysis early in the process.

Content analyses are not necessarily stand-alone designs. For example, a systematic content analysis might be an integral part of the data analysis in a phenomenological study (e.g., see Wennick, Lundqvist, & Hallström, 2009). A content analysis might also be used to flesh out the

[3] Again we refer you to Kraut and colleagues (2004) regarding ethical issues related to studying people's postings on the Internet.

complex, multidimensional aspects of a descriptive or experimental study, resulting in a *mixed-methods design* with both qualitative and quantitative elements (see Chapter 10).

**Method.** As a general rule, a content analysis is quite systematic, and measures are taken to make the process as objective as possible. The following steps are typical:

1. The researcher identifies the specific body of material to be studied. If this body is relatively small, it is studied in its entirety. If it is quite large (e.g., if it consists of all newspaper articles written during a particular time period), a sample (perhaps a random sample) is selected.
2. The researcher defines the characteristics or qualities to be examined in precise, concrete terms. The researcher may identify specific examples of each characteristic as a way of defining it more clearly.
3. If the material to be analyzed involves complex or lengthy items (e.g., works of literature, transcriptions of conversations), the researcher breaks down each item into small, manageable segments that are analyzed separately.
4. The researcher scrutinizes the material for instances of each characteristic or quality defined in Step 2. When judgments are entirely objective (e.g., when the study involves looking for the appearance of certain words in a text), only one judge, or *rater,* is necessary. When judgments are more subjective (e.g., when the study involves categorizing discrete teacher behaviors as reflecting various teaching activities), two or three raters are typically involved, and a composite of their judgments is used.

**Data analysis.** Almost invariably, one crucial step in a content analysis is to tabulate the frequency of each characteristic found in the material being studied. Thus, virtually any content analysis is quantitative as well as qualitative. In some situations, appropriate statistical analyses are performed on the frequencies or percentages obtained to determine whether significant differences exist relevant to the research question. The researcher then uses such tabulations and statistical analyses to interpret the data as they reflect on the problem under investigation.

**The research report.** If you conduct a content analysis, either as your sole methodology or in combination with other designs, you should include the following in your research report:

1. *A description of the body of material you studied.* Describe the overall body of material you wanted to investigate and any sampling procedures that you used to select specific items or artifacts from it.
2. *Precise definitions and descriptions of the characteristics you looked for.* Define each characteristic precisely enough that another researcher could replicate your study. Consider using specific examples from your data to illustrate each characteristic.
3. *The coding or rating procedure.* Describe the procedure that the rater(s) used to evaluate the material and, if applicable, how multiple ratings were combined. If two or more raters were involved, also report the consistency with which they coded the data (see the discussions of *interrater reliability* and *correlation coefficient* in Chapters 4 and 11, respectively).
4. *Tabulations for each characteristic.* Report frequencies or percentages (or both) for each characteristic. Consider using tables or graphs as a way of reporting this information in a concise, organized fashion.
5. *A description of patterns that the data reflect.* Identify themes or trends in the material (e.g., as reflected in your tabulations).

Table 6.1 summarizes the nature of the five designs described in the preceding sections. Keep in mind, however, that these designs are not necessarily as distinctly different as the table might indicate. Any particular study may include elements of two or more qualitative designs. Remember, much qualitative research is, by its very nature, flexible and open-ended, and so it may continue to evolve over the course of a project. To the extent that your research question leads you to believe that two or more designs are equally relevant to your purpose, think creatively about how you might combine them into a single study.

**TABLE 6.1** Distinguishing characteristics of different qualitative designs

| *Design* | *Purpose* | *Focus* | *Methods of Data Collection* | *Methods of Data Analysis* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Case study | To understand one person or situation (or perhaps a very small number) in great depth | One case or a few cases within its/their natural setting | • Observations<br>• Interviews<br>• Appropriate written documents and/or audiovisual material | • Categorization and interpretation of data in terms of common themes<br>• Synthesis into an overall portrait of the case(s) |
| Ethnography | To understand how behaviors reflect the culture of a group | A specific field site in which a group of people share a common culture | • Participant observation<br>• Structured or unstructured interviews with "informants"<br>• Artifact/document collection | • Identification of significant phenomena and underlying structures and beliefs<br>• Organization of data into a logical whole (e.g., chronology, typical day) |
| Phenomenological study | To understand an experience from the participants' points of view | A particular phenomenon as it is typically lived and perceived by human beings | • In-depth, unstructured interviews<br>• Purposeful sampling of 5–25 individuals | • Search for *meaning units* that reflect various aspects of the experience<br>• Integration of the meaning units into a seemingly typical experience |
| Grounded theory study | To derive a theory from data collected in a natural setting | A process, including human actions and interactions and how they result from and influence one another | • Interviews<br>• Any other relevant data sources | • Prescribed and systematic method of coding the data into categories and identifying interrelationships<br>• Continual interweaving of data collection and data analysis<br>• Construction of a theory from the categories and interrelationships |
| Content analysis | To identify the specific characteristics of a body of material | Any verbal, visual, or behavioral form of communication | • Identification and possible sampling of the specific material to be analyzed<br>• Coding of the material in terms of predetermined and precisely defined characteristics | • Tabulation of the frequency of each characteristic<br>• Descriptive or inferential statistical analyses as needed to answer the research question |

Such flexibility should *not,* however, lead you to believe that you can conduct a qualitative research project in a sloppy, poorly-thought-through manner. On the contrary, the flexible nature of a qualitative study makes it just that much more challenging, especially for the novice researcher. *For anything you do in a qualitative study, you must have a definite rationale and a distinct purpose, and you must keep your overall goal—to answer your research question—clearly in sight at all times.*

## CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS EXERCISE Choosing a Qualitative Research Design

Following are brief summaries of five potential research projects. Identify the qualitative methodology that is probably most appropriate for each project. The answers appear after the "For Further Reading" list at the end of the chapter.

1. In an effort to learn the nature and appeal of long-standing social groups among American men, a researcher plans to spend a nine-month period with a local chapter of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks. By observing and interacting with the

Elks, he hopes to observe the chapter's meetings, rituals, and charitable activities and to discover the chapter's beliefs, values, goals, and interpersonal dynamics.

2. A researcher wants to determine to what degree and in what ways television commercials might portray men and women in traditionally gender-stereotypical ways (e.g., how often men versus women are shown cleaning house, how often men versus women are making important business decisions).
3. In order to learn how grassroots political parties emerge and develop over time, a researcher wants to study the origins and evolution of three recently established "Tea Party" groups, one in her own state and two in neighboring states.
4. A researcher is intrigued by Asperger syndrome, a cognitive disability in which people have average or above-average intelligence and language skills but poor social skills and little or no ability to interpret other people's nonverbal social cues (body language, etc.). The researcher wonders what it must be like to be an adolescent with this syndrome—how a teenager is apt to feel about having few or no friends, being regularly excluded from classmates' social activities, and so on.
5. A researcher wants to determine how doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff members coordinate their actions when people with life-threatening traumatic injuries arrive at the emergency room. The researcher can find very little useful research on this topic in professional journals.

## Collecting Data in Qualitative Research

As you have seen, qualitative researchers often use multiple forms of data in any single study. They might use observations, interviews, objects, written documents, audiovisual materials, electronic entities (e.g., e-mail messages, Internet websites), and anything else that can help them answer their research question. Furthermore, many qualitative studies are characterized by an **emerging design**: Data collected early in the investigation often influence the kinds of data the researcher subsequently gathers.

In qualitative research, the potential sources of data are limited only by the researcher's open-mindedness and creativity. For example, in a school setting, a researcher might consider where various students are seated in the lunch room, what announcements are posted on the walls, or what messages are communicated in graffiti (Eisner, 1998). In an ethnographic study of a cultural group, a researcher might ask one or more participants to keep a daily journal or to discuss the content and meaning of photographs and art objects (Creswell, 2007).

Regardless of the kinds of data involved, data collection in a qualitative study takes a great deal of time. The researcher should record any potentially useful data thoroughly, accurately, and systematically, using field notes, audiotapes, sketches, photographs, or some combination of these. As they collect data, many qualitative researchers also begin jotting notes—sometimes called **memos**—about their initial interpretations of what they are seeing and hearing.

It is essential that data collection methods be consistent with the ethical principles presented in Chapter 4. The people being studied must know the nature of the study and be willing participants in it (this is *informed consent),* and any data collected should not be traceable back to particular individuals (thus maintaining participants' *right to privacy*). One common way of keeping personal data confidential is to assign various pseudonyms to different participants and to use those pseudonyms both during data collection and in the final research report.

Common to all qualitative studies is a need to identify an appropriate *sample* from which to acquire data. Another feature that most qualitative studies share (content analyses excepted) is heavy reliance on *observations, interviews,* or both, as a source of data. We now look at each of these three topics more closely.