:inue to
·om them
rrating.

: Eye Image
ugh you are
: away from
1age still, try
The longer

SECOND EDITION
Learning in the Field
An Introduction to Qualitative Research

Gretchen B. Rossman
University of Massachusetts

Sharon F. Rallis
University of Connecticut

SAGE Publications
International Educational and Professional Publisher
Thousand Oaks ▪ London ▪ New Delhi

Gathering data is a discovery process. Ruth, Marla, and Anthony talk with people, observe actions and interactions, and pay attention to physical surroundings to learn about aspects of the social world they want to understand better. Interviewing, observing, and studying material culture are the primary ways to discover and learn in the field. **Interviewing** includes talking with participants both formally (when an interview is set up beforehand) and informally (when the researcher is present in the setting for other activities). **Observing** includes formal, structured noting of events, activities, and speech (for example, when the researcher observes a classroom or a meeting) and participant observation (an overall strategy where the researcher is present in the setting experiencing and noting events). Gathering aspects of **material culture** includes artifacts and written material that may be available in or about the setting or about individuals. These may include documents, minutes of meetings, newspaper articles, clothing, diaries, personal objects, and decorations—anything relevant that may reveal information about the person, setting, or event.

These ways of learning about the phenomenon and setting are often referred to as methods or techniques. We prefer the term **technique** because it captures the notion of "artistic expression or performance in relation to . . . formal details" and "skill or ability in this area" (OED, 1993, p. 3235). When used to describe the work of artists and craftspeople, technique implies knowledge and skills that can be learned; the expression of the technique, however, is unique to each artist. Dancers trained in classical ballet master formal aspects of the dance: They learn and practice similar movements. A weaver learns the techniques of warping a loom and throwing the shuttle with skill and grace. When performing, however, a dancer brings his or her unique artistic understanding and expression to the act; each weaver creates a unique piece of fabric. Just as with dance or weaving, qualitative researchers engage in common actions—formal details of the work—but the specific way one qualitative researcher goes about doing that work—performing it—is unique to that individual and his or her project.

The techniques of qualitative research provide ways of discovering and interpreting aspects of reality; they are the formal ways of gathering information. Through observing, interviewing, and documenting material culture, qualitative researchers capture and represent the richness, texture, and depth of what they study. Data gathering is accomplished (performed) by practicing the techniques; although composed of elements, it is a seamless enterprise. The techniques provide structure;

, and Anthony talk
ıd pay attention to
ᴇ social world they
ınd studying mate-
learn in the field.
ıth formally (when
hen the researcher
ng includes formal,
for example, when
g) and participant
ıer is present in the
ıspects of **material**
ıt may be available
hese may include
ᴇs, clothing, diaries,
ınt that may reveal

on and setting are
efer the term **tech-**
xpression or perfor-
ill or ability in this
e the work of artists
ıd skills that can be
r, is unique to each
ırmal aspects of the
ıts. A weaver learns
he shuttle with skill
ᴇr brings his or her
he act; each weaver
ᴇ or weaving, quali-
ormal details of the
ᴇearcher goes about
ıt individual and his

ways of discovering
rmal ways of gather-
ıg, and documenting
nd represent the rich-
ı gathering is accom-
ılthough composed of
ıes provide structure;

the resulting complex tapestry—the final report—is a unique expression woven by the researcher.

Textbooks on qualitative research typically treat the skills of observing, interviewing, and studying material culture separately, but this is a bit artificial. They are integrated facets of a qualitative study, and skill in one relates to skill in another. Our experience has proven that a good interviewer is also a good observer, just as a good observer tends to be a good interviewer. Conducting a rich, informative interview requires strong questioning and listening skills

> **INTERVIEWING REQUIRES GOOD OBSERVING SKILLS – THEY GO TOGETHER IN A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

as well as finely honed observation skills. Marla, Ruth, and Anthony are observing while they drive to interviews, enter offices, and wait for appointments. They notice the body movements and dress of their participants during interviews, based on the assumption that nonverbal cues are central to people's perceptions (Roth, 2001).

Observations signal participants' emotions, attention and interest, authenticity, and fatigue, for example. These cues also suggest avenues to explore and when to redirect questions. In short, observations lead researchers to interviews, suggest questions they had not anticipated, and yield topics they might want to explore. Ideas exchanged during interviews suggest other places to observe and potential sources of material culture. Aspects of material culture, in turn, may well provide impressions to pursue through observing and interviewing. Findings from one technique may confirm hunches or suggest new directions. While in the field, Anthony, Ruth, and Marla find they are continuously observing, interviewing, and studying material culture, although at any given point, their energies focus more on one particular technique.

Observation, interviewing, and studying material culture are not passive states, and the researcher is much more than a sponge that simply absorbs data. A qualitative researcher's mind is trained to be alert and to work actively. Qualitative researchers develop extraordinarily sensitive antennae to pick up relevant data from numerous sources. Their techniques vary as they react to incoming data; they analyze

> **COLLECTING QUALITATIVE DATA IS NOT PASSIVE**

and interpret data as they gather them. Whatever is happening in the field, they discover something new—about the setting, the participants, and themselves. Discovery and learning are integral to gathering data. This chapter describes how qualitative researchers discover and learn

through observing, asking questions of participants and themselves, and exploring aspects of the material world.

DECISIONS ABOUT GATHERING DATA

Although initially appearing simple, the processes of gathering data entail complex and intertwined decisions and actions. A researcher's choice of technique at any point in the project depends on the strategy adopted (see Chapter 1), views on epistemology and the social world (see Chapter 2), the specific qualitative genre to which the work links (see Chapter 4), and how these preliminary choices interact with participants in the setting. Ask yourself the following questions:

★ Is the project an evaluation, action research, or a descriptive study?

★ What are the researcher's assumptions about reality and knowledge claims?

★ Is the work an ethnography, a phenomenologic study, or a socio-linguistic one?

★ How do actions and reactions of participants shape what is possible, desirable, and ethical?

Decisions in these areas may be forecast in the research design but, because flexibility and responsiveness are integral to qualitative research, the researcher repeatedly revisits those initial decisions and modifies them in light of the unfolding project. Thus, what the researcher does at any given moment is influenced as much by what he encounters and what evolves in the field as by what he anticipated in the project design.

Given choices about strategy, epistemology, and genre, there are three major areas for decision making about data-gathering techniques: how deeply or broadly they will be applied, how prefigured or open-ended their focus will be, and what the ebb and flow among techniques will be. Think of these decision arenas as continua, just as in Chapter 2. You can stipulate a position along the continua in designing your project, but be willing to move.

nts and themselves,

es of gathering data
tions. A researcher's
epends on the strat-
logy and the social
genre to which the
preliminary choices
urself the following

rch, or a descriptive

ut reality and knowl-

ogic study, or a socio-

ts shape what is possi-

research design but,
tegral to qualitative
e initial decisions and
ect. Thus, what the
d as much by what he
at he anticipated in the

l genre, there are three
ering techniques: how
figured or open-ended
ong techniques will be.
s in Chapter 2. You can
ng your project, but be

Depth or Breadth

Qualitative researchers decide how deeply or broadly to employ data-gathering techniques. Where you position yourself along this continuum involves trade-offs. Given the triangle of do-ability, want-to-do-ability, and should-do-ability, you will be unable to gather data both broadly and in depth. You must make choices. Gathering data from a large number of participants yields information from many perspectives; this gives the study **breadth**. Focusing on a few participants, in contrast, encourages an **in-depth understanding** not possible with a larger sample.

ρ **Ruth** gathers data from a few participants, consistent with her strategy of a descriptive study and the phenomenologic genre framing her methodology. Her study is essentially *in-depth*.

μ **Marla** and her action research team decide that they want to gather data from the community served by the health clinic: They observe in the clinic for a few weeks, gathering data broadly about the setting. They then decide to interview women and seek a *balance between breadth and depth* by briefly interviewing 15 to 20 women once and then focusing with further interviews on three women whose stories are particularly compelling. Because Marla is working with a team, she is able to capture both broader perspectives and in-depth portraits of the women's lives.

α Given the demands of **Anthony's** evaluation, he must gather data broadly to satisfy decision makers' needs. He begins by observing a variety of events; he supplements this with surveys and short interviews. To elaborate these broad findings, he decides to conduct in-depth interviews with a few users and nonusers. He, too, seeks *a balance between breadth and depth*.

Prefigured or Open-Ended

Planning interviews or observations entails thinking about how tightly you want to control questions or topics. **Prefigured techniques** carefully specify interview questions or closely structure observations. Anthony prefigures most of the techniques he uses. He relies on checklists in observing arts activities. He has developed forms with categories for noting actions and interactions and for judging audience reactions to events. He has determined the important focuses for his attention based on his reading of the literature about arts programs and his own experiences with the arts. His interviews, similarly, consist of a

set of questions that he asks of users and nonusers. He modifies the questions as he moves through his project, but they remain essentially as he anticipated.

Open-ended techniques, in contrast, are designed to encourage the important observation or interviewing categories to emerge as the project unfolds. Ruth's decision to approach her study in an open-ended way, consistent with the phenomenologic genre, means that her observations and interviews are more holistic and exploratory than Anthony's. She chooses to do some preliminary observation in the after-school center: She goes there several days in a row, letting impressions—sights, sounds, and scents—shape her judgments about what is important. Her subsequent interviews with children and their families are guided by a small number of topics that she wishes to explore. Moreover, she is careful to listen for what matters to the children; she has developed the topics from some reading of the literature but assumes that she will learn considerably more as the project evolves. Marla and her research team identify four or five broad, open-ended questions to start their conversations with the women they interview.

Our characters' stances relative to this continuum are shaped by the specific qualitative strategies they employ and the genres to which their studies link. Evaluations and policy studies are focused and instrumental. Although all qualitative research is open-ended, this strategy is more tightly controlled by the researcher from the outset. Descriptive studies, however, are designed to be more emergent than evaluations. Of the three strategies, action research is the most open-ended; participants and researcher collectively determine what is important to inquire about and how tightly they will structure their techniques.

Ebb and Flow

A final decision is the **mix of techniques**. This mix, too, is forecast in the study's design and may change over the course of the research. In some projects, observing takes the lead and is complemented by interviews and analyses of material culture. In others, interviews and observations proceed hand in hand. For still others, interviews may be the primary technique used, supplemented by limited observations.

As noted previously, Marla decides to do some preliminary holistic observing in the clinic to get a sense of interactions and issues. As her action research team gels, it conducts structured interviews of several women and then complement these data with in-depth, more phenomenologic interviews with three women. The design emerges as the team

modifies the
in essentially

to encourage
merge as the
1 open-ended
1at her obser-
ratory than
n in the after-
npressions—
out what is
their families
1s to explore.
children; she
iterature but
oject evolves.
, open-ended
y interview.
shaped by the
o which their
d instrumen-
is strategy is
t. Descriptive
valuations. Of
1ded; partici-
ant to inquire
1.

00, is forecast
e research. In
1ted by inter-
ws and obser-
s may be the
tions.
inary holistic
issues. As her
ws of several
1ore phenom-
1s as the team

members work together to determine their focus and how to gather data. Anthony designs his evaluation to include observing, interviewing, and a survey of community members, both users and nonusers. He implements all three techniques at the outset of the project. Although what he learns through one technique informs his use of another, they proceed as parallel streams. Ruth begins with holistic observing. As she builds relations with children and their parents, she relies exclusively on iterative, in-depth interviews.

SYSTEMATIC INQUIRY

The skills involved in gathering data—asking questions, listening, looking, and reading—are skills used in everyday life. Human beings use all three in daily life to establish, maintain, negotiate, verify, and participate in everyday events (Blumer, 1969). These activities are "part of the psychology of perception, and, as such, they are a tacit part of the everyday functioning of individuals as they negotiate the events of daily life" (Evertson & Green, 1986, p. 163). People observe, ask questions, listen, and read more deliberately, systematically, and instrumentally when learning something new. A child learning a new game may observe until she discerns the rules, or she may read a book that covers the

> PEOPLE SEE, HEAR, SMELL, TASTE, AND TOUCH AS NATURAL ACTIVITIES OF EVERYDAY LIFE.
>
> WHAT DIFFERENTIATES SYSTEMATIC QUALITATIVE INQUIRY FROM THESE EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES IS PURPOSE AND DISCIPLINE.

rules. The child might ask questions of players to discover the nuances of the game. On the surface, the skills used in data gathering are everyday actions that are sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously used.

Observing, interviewing, and studying material culture as data gathering for systematic inquiry, however, are different from simply watching actions or events, talking to people, or reading about a topic. When employed in a research project, these sense-making activities are used more **diligently and systematically.** As inquiry techniques, they are differentiated from their everyday cousins by purpose and discipline. Qualitative researchers use these techniques to capture actions, words, and artifacts—data—so that they may scrutinize these data to learn about social phenomena.

Data About the Research

As researchers, Marla, Ruth, and Anthony learn to discipline themselves to record data systematically so that they and others may examine and reflect on them. Data are more than just ideas or images floating around in the observer's head. They are images and ideas documented as completely and accurately as possible to form a record of what the researcher has learned. Once recorded, data take on a tangible reality: They can be examined and reflected on. This reflection transforms the data into information that can be used to build knowledge.

During data gathering, the researcher's challenge is to **build a foundation** for whatever findings or conclusions are drawn. Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 about knowledge claims. If you claim to know something as a result of your research, data must exist to support those claims. Vague, impressionistic assertions will not do. Observation notes—field notes—describe settings, activities, people, and their interactions. Interview records may be either direct transcripts of tape-recorded conversations or detailed, handwritten notes of the dialogue. Records about material culture might include photographs, descriptions of objects, or documents. Notes added to interview transcripts and field notes include your comments about methods choices, difficulties or surprises encountered, impressions, and analytic and interpretive possibilities. All these records constitute the corpus of data from which your assertions should logically flow.

Data About the Process and Yourself

Just as you gather and record data from observations, interviews, and material culture, you record data about your own research activities and their development. Consider these questions:

* ★ What do you **observe** and why?

* ★ What **questions** do you ask and why?

* ★ What **changes** in the preliminary design do you make and why?

* ★ What **preconceptions** and **prejudices** are shaping your project?

* ★ What **problems** do you encounter?

* ★ How does your **membership** in particular social groups (race, gender, primary language, and age) shape the research?

o discipline them-
others may exam-
or images floating
ideas documented
ecord of what the
a tangible reality:
ion transforms the
rledge.
is to **build a foun-**
wn. Recall the dis-
you claim to know
:ist to support those
ot do. Observation
ple, and their inter-
transcripts of tape-
otes of the dialogue.
graphs, descriptions
transcripts and field
es, difficulties or sur-
interpretive possibili-
ita from which your

tions, interviews, and
vn research activities

lo you make and why?

e shaping your project?

ar social groups (race,
: the research?

As noted previously, err on the side of telling more details about the natural history of the project than too few.

Because qualitative inquiry happens in a natural environment, the discipline to **document findings and procedures systematically and thoroughly** is even more essential than in a laboratory or experiment in which conditions are controlled. Occurrences in the setting—people's moods and health, weather, crises and accidents, political events, and births and deaths—all affect data gathering. For example, Marla and her team find people in the clinic preoccupied with the upcoming vote for statehood in their native Puerto Rico. Conversations swirl around this controversial issue. Marla finds she has to reschedule interviews originally planned for the day of the vote.

Anthony develops prefigured, standardized instruments (observation protocols, interview guides, and questionnaires) to capture participant responses so they can be easily compared. He finds that these instruments limit what people say and how he records what people do. He cannot always use the same instruments in the same way; he finds this too constraining for the complexity of the arts program and participants' views. Using the same instruments at every art event, every time he observes at the center, or with every person he interviews, moreover, does not yield standardized data. Part of his craft knowledge is knowing when to modify the design and instruments. His skill is how completely he records what he sees, hears, and reads as data. His system includes documenting how, where, and under what conditions he gathered these data.

Data gathering is a **deliberate, conscious, systematic process** that details both the products—the data—and the processes of the research activities so that others may understand how the study was performed and can judge its adequacy, strength, and ethics. Recording what is learned takes persistence and effort, but a researcher submits to this discipline so that she may analyze her data—and so that others may decide if they agree with the processes and the conclusions. The data are not unexamined impressions; they are strong, complete, detailed documentation that includes the interpretive material of the researcher's perspectives and values. Data gathering entails diligently recording and reflecting, recording those reflections, and reflecting on those recordings.

Practicing systematic qualitative inquiry is **both simple and complex,** at least as simple and complex as the world you study. Your decisions are driven by your goal: to describe sensitively and accurately the focus of your study. The techniques you use help you do that. Blumer (1969) notes,

Methods are mere instruments designed to identify and analyze the obdurate character of the empirical world, and as such, their value exists only in their suitability in enabling this task to be done. The choices made in each part of the act of scientific inquiry should and must be assessed in terms of whether they respect the nature of the empirical world under study. (pp. 27-28, italics added)

As qualitative researchers gather data, they strive to make decisions that respect the specific empirical worlds they study. Unfortunately, **no social world is simple,** so decisions are not simple either. In the next sections, we describe the three primary ways of gathering data using examples from our characters and our own work.

GENERIC IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWING

In-depth interviewing is the hallmark of qualitative research. "Talk" is essential for understanding how participants view their worlds. Often, deeper understandings develop through the dialogue of long, in-depth interviews, as interviewer and participant "coconstruct" meaning. **Interviewing takes you into participants' worlds,** at least as far as they can (or choose to) verbally relate what is in their minds. But be mindful that an interview is, in a sense, an artificial event: An interview thus can be distinguished from naturally occurring talk. The skillful interviewer asks for elaboration and concrete examples; these can elicit the detailed narratives that make qualitative inquiry rich. This section details processes and considerations in generic in-depth interviewing; the following section discusses specialized forms.

> **WHY INTERVIEW?**
>
> ★ TO UNDERSTAND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVES
>
> ★ TO PROBE OR CLARIFY
>
> ★ TO DEEPEN UNDERSTANDING
>
> ★ TO GENERATE RICH, DESCRIPTIVE DATA
>
> ★ TO GATHER INSIGHTS INTO PARTICIPANTS' THINKING
>
> ★ TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CONTEXT

group setting more conducive to talking about their lives. In a study of early graduation from high school, the researcher found that students preferred talking with her privately. So much anguish colored their decisions to leave high school early that the students felt uncomfortable talking about it with other people around. The researcher was trained as a counselor; she was skilled in asking probing questions with delicacy and tact. In another study, we found that talking with high school students about the curriculum and graduation requirements worked well in small groups. Ideas flowed and "popped" as one student shared his experiences, triggering recollections and insights in the others. Given this variability, it makes sense to vary your interviewing strategies when working with young adults or to be prepared to modify the strategy if it is not working well.

ρ **Ruth** interviews children who use wheelchairs. With the younger ones, she engages them in play activities through which they can talk about the child's life—joys and challenges in navigating a world designed for people who can walk. She joins them for lunch or recess to defuse the focus on straight face-to-face talk. With older students, she tries one-on-one interviewing; with some, it works; others appear to feel too shy or reticent for much talk to ensue.

Another primary way of gathering data is through observation. Observation generates field notes as the running record of what you notice in a setting. Like other data-gathering techniques, it may focus broadly or in depth, and it may be open-ended or particularistic.

OBSERVING PEOPLE, ACTIONS, AND EVENTS

WHY OBSERVE?

★ TO UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

★ TO SEE TACIT PATTERNS

★ TO SEE PATTERNS PEOPLE ARE UNWILLING TO TALK ABOUT

★ TO PROVIDE DIRECT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND KNOWLEDGE

★ TO MOVE BEYOND THE SELECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF BOTH RESEARCHER AND PARTICIPANTS

As noted at the beginning of the chapter, observation is fundamental to all qualitative inquiry. Even in in-depth interview studies, observation plays an important role as the researcher notes body language and affect in addition to the participant's words. Observation takes you inside the setting; it helps you discover complexity in social settings by being there. It entails

lives. In a study of
ound that students
colored their deci-
felt uncomfortable
cher was trained as
tions with delicacy
with high school
quirements worked
one student shared
hts in the others.
rviewing strategies
modify the strategy

. With the younger
hich they can talk
avigating a world
r lunch or recess to
older students, she
thers appear to feel

ough observation.
ecord of what you
iques, it may focus
rticularistic.

TS

t the beginning of
er, observation is
al to all qualitative
ven in in-depth
tudies, observation
portant role as the
notes body lan-
affect in addition to
ant's words. Obser-
es you inside the
helps you dis-
lexity in social set-
ing there. It entails

systematic noting and recording of events, actions, and interactions. In the socio-communications genre, observing frequently entails video-taping events and interactions to create a permanent record for subsequent analysis. The challenge is to identify the "big picture" while noting huge amounts of detail in multiple and complex actions.

For studies relying exclusively on observation, the researcher makes no special effort to have a particular role; to be tolerated as an unobtrusive observer is often enough. Classroom observational studies are one example often found in education. Through observation, the researcher learns about actions and infers the meanings those actions have for participants. This technique assumes that actions are purposeful and expressive of deeper values and beliefs. Observation can be tightly prefigured, using structured, detailed notations of behavior guided by checklists, or it may be a more holistic description of events and activities. Again, these observations are often videotaped.

> **WHAT TO OBSERVE?**
>
> ★ THE SOCIAL SYSTEM:
>   FORMAL AND/OR INFORMAL
>   PATTERNS OF INTERACTION
>   WAYS PEOPLE ORGANIZE
>   THEMSELVES
>   TACIT RULES IN OPERATION
>   RECURRING EVENTS
>   "DOWN TIME"
>
> ★ ACTIVITIES AND ACTIONS:
>   FULL SEQUENCE OF EVENTS
>   TIME SAMPLING
>   RITUALS AND CEREMONIES
>   CRISES
>   UNPLANNED ACTIVITIES

In the early stages of a study, qualitative researchers often enter the setting with broad areas of interest but without predetermined categories or strict observational checklists, as do Ruth and Marla. The researcher is thus able to discover the recurring patterns of events and relationships. After such patterns are identified and described through early analysis of field notes, checklists or protocols become more appropriate and context sensitive. Focused observation may then be used at later stages of the study.

Taking Field Notes

You need to turn what you see and hear (or, perhaps, smell and taste) into data. Even if you are videotaping events in the setting, you will need to systematically record your impressions, insights, and emerging hypotheses. You do this by writing field notes—the written record of your perceptions in the field. Field notes have two major components:

TAKING FIELD NOTES

★ WRITE DESCRIPTIVELY:
    WHERE YOU OBSERVED
    WHO WAS THERE AND NOT
        THERE
    WHAT HAPPENED
    WHEN EVENTS HAPPENED
    WHY EVENTS TOOK PLACE

★ USE SPECIFIC AND CONCRETE
    DETAILS:
    USE EVOCATIVE ADJECTIVES
    USE ACTION VERBS
    AVOID EVALUATIVE
        LANGUAGE
    BE SPECIFIC
    THEN BE EVEN MORE
        SPECIFIC!

---

the descriptive data of what you observe and your comments on those data or on the project itself. The former are called **the running record,** and they are exactly that: You capture as much detail as possible about the physical environment and the activities and interactions among the people in that environment. The second component is your commentary on that running record and is typically referred to as **observer comments.** These may include your emotional reactions to events, analytic insights, questions about meaning, and thoughts for modifying your design. The running record is the data about the research; the observer comments are the data about the process and yourself. Such observational field notes are also added to interview transcripts to augment and interpret the exact words of the interview. The particular form that raw field notes take is idiosyncratic. You need to find what works for you; what is crucial is having as much detail as possible. Raw field notes are typically taken by hand in the setting. In some settings, you might be able to use a laptop computer, but be careful that the technology is not distracting or obtrusive. In rare instances when taking notes would be totally inappropriate, you need to find a way to remove yourself to a quiet place to write notes that you will elaborate later. The bathroom can be used for this purpose!

Making Raw Field Notes Usable

As soon as possible after fieldwork, it is critical to **write up the raw notes.** Writing up involves transcribing handwritten notes into the computer, elaborating skimpy data, and adding commentary. Try to organize the notes while doing so, thus doing some preliminary analysis. Ideally, these write-ups occur the same day or the day after. This is a good time to catch vague statements and clarify unfounded assumptions that appear in the data. For example, if our notes say, "All students were expected to have partially filled out a similar chart from the day

lata of what you
ur comments on
ı the project itself.
alled **the running**
y are exactly that:
uch detail as possi-
ſsical environment
s and interactions
le in that environ-
nd component is
ſy on that running
ically referred to as
nents. These may
ɔtional reactions to
insights, questions
and thoughts for
design. The run-
he data about the
bserver comments
ut the process and
d to interview tran-
the interview. The
cratic. You need to
much detail as pos-
ːhe setting. In some
, but be careful that
ıre instances when
ːed to find a way to
t you will elaborate

write up the raw
tten notes into the
ommentary. Try to
preliminary analy-
ːe day after. This is a
ınfounded assump-
tes say, "All students
chart from the day

before," "She looked nervous," or "The cases at the clinic this week were more difficult than last," we try to add why we knew what was expected of the students, what actions led us to believe the woman was nervous, or what cases we observed this week and why we saw them as more difficult than the previous week's. Usually, if the fieldwork was done quite recently, what we have said in our notes sparks our memories for details; if our memories are blank, we recognize a hole and try to seek further information later.

This is the stage when you write "**thick descriptions**" (Geertz, 1973). Thick descriptions present details, emotions, and textures of social relationships. Denzin (1994) notes that "[A]n event or process can be neither interpreted nor understood until it has been well described" (p. 505). Thick descriptions are necessary for "thick interpretation" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). In an early attempt at field notes, Anthony writes, "Fifty people from the neighborhood attended the dance exhibition. Several ethnic groups and both genders were there. Everyone enjoyed themselves." Later, he writes:

> Eavesdropping on a cluster (three women, one man; black, white, Hispanic) near the sculpture of "City Girl," I heard conversation about how the artist has done the girl's hair. One asked, "How could she get the cornrows so realistic?" Another begins to describe the method she heard about in her ceramics workshop. Conversation turns to how (can?) artists make a living. One leaves to refill her glass; she returns with a tray of finger-foods.

From time to time, you may need an assist to remind you of your focus in writing field notes. Creating or adapting existing instruments can be helpful in recording data. Tables, checklists, diagrams, blueprints, and sketches that chart spatial relationships, classify or quantify interactions or verbal content, map work flow or work stations, or illustrate social relationships serve to make data out of what you see and hear. Because your task is to record what you see and hear, for it to become data, use whatever instruments will facilitate that process.

STUDYING MATERIAL CULTURE

Qualitative researchers often supplement observing and interviewing with studying aspects of material culture produced in the course of everyday events. These might include objects, such as children's

schoolwork or photographs from a staff picnic, but are typically documents—the written record of a person's life or an organization's functioning. Journals, diaries, minutes of meetings, policy statements, letters, and announcements are all examples of material culture that researchers gather and analyze to better understand the social worlds they study. Semioticists focus exclusively on material culture, gathering and analyzing the icons expressive of a culture. Gathering documents and other aspects of material culture is relatively unobtrusive and potentially rich in portraying the values and beliefs in a setting or social domain.

Archival data are another example of material culture. These are the routinely gathered records of a society, community, or organization—for example, attendance records, test scores, and birth and death records. Marital patterns among a group of native Mexicans, discovered through fieldwork in a community, could be tested through marriage records found in the offices of the county seat or state capitol. Descriptions of articulated funding priorities by policymakers could be corroborated (or not) through an analysis of budgetary allocations.

The analysis of documents often entails a specialized approach called **content analysis.** Best thought of as an overall approach, a method,

> **IS EVERYTHING "TEXT"?**

and an analytic strategy, content analysis entails the systematic examination of forms of communication to objectively document patterns. A more objectivist approach than other qualitative methods, traditional content analysis allows the researcher to obtain a quantitative description. The raw material of content analysis may be any form of communication, usually written materials (textbooks, novels, newspapers, and electronic mail); other forms of communication, however—such as music, pictures, or political speeches—may also be included.

A postmodern or critical approach to material culture might construe all products of a society as text: Movies, plays, or advertisements, for example, could form the basis for such analyses. The strategy here is to analyze critically what is portrayed and symbolized in such textual representations and what is absent or silenced. A semiotic researcher might analyze billboard advertisements for their depiction of women, or study posters in an urban area for evidence of a social awareness campaign about HIV/AIDS. Anthony, for example, could examine the "text" of an arts event from a socioeconomic perspective, searching for evidence of middle-class values and oppression of working-class ones.

but are typically
· an organization's
policy statements,
iterial culture that
l the social worlds
culture, gathering
hering documents
· unobtrusive and
i a setting or social

ture. These are the
or organization—
birth and death
xicans, discovered
through marriage
or state capitol.
cymakers could be
iry allocations.
ed approach called
proach, a method,
content analysis
nation of forms of
ly document pat-
proach than other
ws the researcher
l of content analy-
en materials (text-
; other forms of
ares, or political

ulture might con-
ays, or advertise-
ch analyses. The
d and symbolized
r silenced. A semi-
ats for their depic-
for evidence of a
ony, for example,
cioeconomic per-
es and oppression

Further examples may help. When we are in an office of a principal who tells us, "All children in *my* school learn," we look for evidence of children's work. One principal described how she assisted teachers to implement inquiry-based, student-centered learning by revising their lesson plans to meet state requirements. She was pleased to open her files and illustrate the before-and-after plans. Seeing these materials clarified for us her efforts as well as her purposes. In another case, neither interviews with the teacher nor observations in the classroom were as powerful as the booklets and newsletters the class had produced or the videotape a parent had made of the class during the entire year.

Material culture can offer data that contradict words and sights. A counselor may declare his or her deep interest in every one of his adolescent clients, but a daily schedule jam-packed with an impressive number of clients in short sessions with no time for reflection may lead us to doubt his or her sincerity. Letters to the editor of the local newspaper complaining of the glaring graffiti on the walls and the debris around the community center can belie the director's contention that his or her board and the neighborhood are having success in cleaning up the area. The zoo's program director promises new hands-on activities for members; the glossy brochures advertise "new ways to see the animals." The schedule, however, lists traditional sit-and-watch-the-animals-perform events. All these schedules, booklets, advertisements, plans, and letters are objects that may become data and can enrich understanding of the phenomena studied.

USING THE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

★ **Comfort with ambiguity**

★ **Capacity to make reasoned decisions and to articulate the logic behind those decisions**

★ **Deep interpersonal or emotional sensitivity**

★ **Ethical sensitivity of potential consequences to individuals and groups**

★ **Political sensitivity**

★ **Perseverance and self-discipline**

★ **Awareness of when to bring closure**