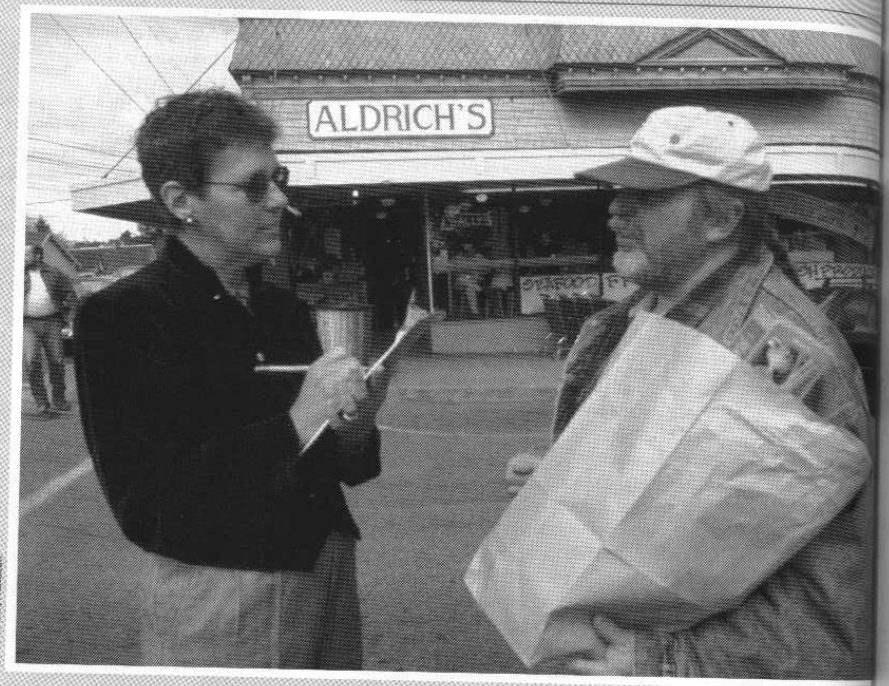
10 QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH



Paul Conklin/PhotoEdit

What You'll Learn in This Chapter

Here you'll see that qualitative field research enables researchers to observe social life in its natural habitat: to go where the action is and watch. This type of research can produce a richer understanding of many social phenomena than can be achieved through other observational methods, provided that the researcher observes in a deliberate, well-planned, and active way.

In this chapter . . .

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Earl Bubbie

The impact of the observer is a fundamental issue in social research. If you participate in the events you are studying, observing them directly, up close and personal, won't your presence there change things? How can you observe something as though you aren't actually there observing it? In other words, how close is too close?

See the "What Do You Think? Revisited" box toward the end of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Several chapters ago, I suggested that you've been doing social research all your life. This idea should become even clearer as we turn to what probably seems like the most obvious method of making observations: qualitative field research. In a sense, we do field research whenever we observe or participate in social behavior and try to understand it, whether in a college classroom, in a doctor's waiting room, or on an airplane. Whenever we report our observations to others, we are reporting our field research efforts.

Such research is at once very old and very new in social science, stretching at least from the nineteenth century studies of preliterate societies, through firsthand examinations of urban community life in the "Chicago School" of the 1930s and 1940s, to contemporary observations of web chat-room interactions. Many of the techniques discussed in this chapter have been used by social researchers for centuries. Within the social sciences, anthropologists are especially associated with this method and have contributed greatly to its development as a scientific technique. Moreover, many people who might not, strictly speaking, be regarded as social science researchers employ something similar to field research. Welfare department case workers are one example; newspaper reporters are another.

To take this last example further, consider that interviewing is a technique common to both journalism and sociology. A journalist uses the data to report a subject's attitude, belief, or experience—that's usually it. Sociologists, on the other hand, treat an interview as data that need to be analyzed in depth; their ultimate goal is to understand social life in the context of theory, using established analytical techniques. Although sociology and journalism use similar techniques, the two disciplines view and use data differently.

Although many of the techniques involved in field research are "natural" activities, they are also skills to be learned and honed. This chapter discusses these skills in some detail, examining some of the major paradigms of field research and describing some specific techniques that make scientific field research more useful than the casual observation we all engage in.

As we'll see, there are many paradigms associated with field research, which comprises a wide range of studies. This range stems in part from differences among paradigms—specifically, the variety of theoretical approaches to basic questions such as "What is data?" "How should we collect data?" and "How should we analyze data?"

I use the term *qualitative field research* to distinguish this type of observation method from methods designed to produce data appropriate for quantitative (statistical) analysis. Thus, surveys provide data from which to calculate the percentage unemployed in a population, mean incomes, and so forth. Field research more typically yields qualitative data: observations not easily reduced to numbers. Thus, for example, a field researcher may note the "paternalistic demeanor" of leaders at a political rally or the "defensive evasions" of a public official at a public hearing without trying to express either the paternalism or the defensiveness as numerical quantities or degrees. Although field research can be used to collect quantitative data—for example, noting the number of interactions of various specified types within a field setting—typically, field research is qualitative.

Field observation also differs from some other models of observation in that it's not just a data-collecting activity. Frequently, perhaps typically, it's a theory-generating activity as well. As a field researcher, you'll seldom approach your task with precisely defined hypotheses to be tested. More typically, you'll attempt to make sense out of an ongoing process that cannot be predicted in advance—making initial observations, developing tentative general conclusions that suggest particular types of further observations, making those observations and thereby revising your conclusions, and so forth. In short, the alternation of induction and deduction discussed in Part I of this book is perhaps nowhere more evident and essential than in good field research. For expository purposes, however, this chapter focuses primarily on some of the theoretical foundations of field research and on techniques of data collection. Chapter 13 discusses how to analyze qualitative data.

Keep in mind that the types of methods researchers use depend in part on the specific research questions they want to answer. For example, a question such as "How do women construct their everyday lives in order to perform their roles as mothers, partners, and breadwinners?" could be addressed by either in-depth interviews or direct observations—or both. The assessment of advertising campaigns might profit from focus group discussions. In most cases, researchers have many field research methods to choose from.

TOPICS APPROPRIATE TO FIELD RESEARCH

One of the key strengths of field research is how comprehensive a perspective it can give researchers. By going directly to the social phenomenon under study and observing it as completely as possible, researchers can develop a deeper and fuller understanding of it. As such, this mode of observation is especially, though not exclusively, appropriate to research topics and social studies that appear to defy simple quantification. Field researchers may recognize several nuances of attitude and behavior that might escape researchers using other methods.

Field research is especially appropriate to the study of those attitudes and behaviors best understood within their natural setting, as opposed to the somewhat artificial settings of experiments and surveys. For example, field research provides a superior method for studying the dynamics of religious conversion at a revival meeting, just as a statistical analysis of membership rolls would be a better way of discovering whether men or women were more likely to convert.

Finally, field research is well suited to the study of social processes over time. Thus, the field researcher might be in a position to examine the rumblings and final explosion of a riot as events actually occur rather than afterward in a reconstruction of the events.

Other good places to apply field research methods include campus demonstrations, courtroom proceedings, labor negotiations, public hearings, or similar events taking place within a relatively limited area and time. Several such observations must be combined in a more comprehensive examination over time and space.

In *Analyzing Social Settings,* John Lofland and colleagues (2006:123–132) discuss several elements of social life appropriate to field research.

A. *Practices:* Various kinds of behavior, such as talking or reading a book
B. *Episodes:* A variety of events such as divorce, crime, and illness
C. *Encounters:* Two or more people meeting and interacting
D. *Roles and Social Types:* The analysis of the positions people occupy and the behavior associated with those positions: occupations, family roles, ethnic groups
E. *Social and Personal Relationships:* Behavior appropriate to pairs or sets of roles: mother-son relationships, friendships, and the like
F. *Groups and Cliques:* Small groups, such as friendship cliques, athletic teams, and work groups.
G. *Organizations:* Formal organizations, such as hospitals or schools
H. *Settlements and Habitats:* Small-scale "societies" such as villages, ghettos, and neighborhoods, as opposed to large societies such as nations, which are difficult to study
I. *Subcultures and Lifestyles:* How large numbers of people adjust to life in groups such as a "ruling class" or an "urban underclass"

In all these social settings, field research can reveal things that would not otherwise be apparent. Here's a concrete example.

One issue I'm particularly interested in (Babbie 1985) is the nature of responsibility for public matters: Who's responsible for maintaining the things that we share? Who's responsible for keeping public spaces—parks, malls, buildings, and so on—clean? Who's responsible for seeing that broken street signs get fixed? Or, if a strong wind knocks over garbage cans and rolls them around the street, who's responsible for getting them out of the street?

On the surface, the answers to these questions are pretty clear. We have formal and informal agreements in our society that assign responsibility for these activities. Government custodians are the ones who keep public places clean. Transportation department employees take care of the street signs, and perhaps the police deal with the garbage cans rolling around on a windy day. And when these responsibilities are not fulfilled, we tend to look for someone to blame.

What fascinates me is the extent to which the assignment of responsibility for public things to specific individuals not only relieves others of the responsibility but actually prohibits them from taking it on. It's my notion that it has become unacceptable for someone like you or me to take personal responsibility for public matters that haven't been assigned to us.

Let me illustrate what I mean. If you were walking through a public park and you threw down a bunch of trash, you'd discover that your action was unacceptable to those around you. People would glare at you, grumble to each other; perhaps someone would say something to you about it. Whatever the form, you'd be subjected to definite, negative sanctions for littering. Now here's the irony. If you were walking through that same park, came across a bunch of trash that someone else had

dropped, and cleaned it up, it's likely that your action would also produce negative sanctions from those around you.

When I first began discussing this pattern with students, most felt the notion was absurd. Although littering would bring negative sanctions, cleaning up a public place would obviously bring positive ones: People would be pleased with us for doing it. Certainly, all my students said they would be pleased if someone cleaned up a public place. It seemed likely that everyone else would be pleased, too, if we asked them how they would react to someone's cleaning up litter in a public place or otherwise taking personal responsibility for fixing some social problem.

To settle the issue, I suggested that my students start fixing the public problems they came across in the course of their everyday activities. As they did so, I asked them to note the answers to two questions:

1. How did they feel while they were fixing a public problem they had not been assigned responsibility for?
2. How did others around them react?

My students picked up litter, fixed street signs, put knocked-over traffic cones back in place, cleaned and decorated communal lounges in their dorms, trimmed trees that blocked visibility at intersections, repaired public playground equipment, cleaned public restrooms, and took care of a hundred other public problems that weren't "their responsibility."

Most reported feeling very uncomfortable doing whatever they did. They felt foolish, goody-goody, conspicuous, and all the other feelings that usually keep us from performing these activities. In almost every case, the reactions of those around them increased their discomfort. One student was removing a damaged and long-unused newspaper box from the bus stop, where it had been a problem for months, when the police arrived, having been summoned by a neighbor. Another student decided to clean out a clogged storm drain on his street and found himself being yelled at by a neighbor who insisted that the mess should be left for the street cleaners. Everyone who picked up litter was sneered at, laughed at, and generally put down. One young man was picking up litter scattered around a trash can when a passerby sneered, "Clumsy!" It became clear to us that there are only three acceptable explanations for picking up litter in a public place:

1. You did it and got caught—somebody forced you to clean up your mess.
2. You did it and felt guilty.
3. You're stealing litter.

In the normal course of life in the United States, it's simply not acceptable for people to take responsibility for public things.

Clearly, we could not have discovered the nature and strength of agreements about taking personal responsibility for public things except through field research. Social norms suggest that taking responsibility is a good thing, sometimes referred to as good citizenship. Asking people what they thought about taking responsibility would have produced a solid consensus that it was good. Only going out into life, doing it, and watching what happened gave us an accurate picture.

As an interesting footnote to this story, my students and I found that whenever people could get past their initial reactions and discover that the students were simply taking responsibility for fixing things for the sake of having them work, the passersby tended to assist. Although there are some very strong agreements making it "unsafe" to take responsibility for public things, the willingness of one person to rise above those agreements seemed to make it safe for others to do so, and they did.

In summary, field research offers the advantage of probing social life in its natural habitat. Although some things can be studied adequately in questionnaires or in the laboratory, others cannot. And direct observation in the field lets researchers observe subtle communications and other events that might not be anticipated or measured otherwise.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS IN QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

Every research method presents specific issues and concerns, and qualitative field research is no exception. When you use field research methods, you're confronted with decisions about the role you'll play as an observer and your relations with the people you're observing. Let's examine some of the issues involved in these decisions.

The Various Roles of the Observer

In field research, observers can play any of several roles, including participating in what they want to observe (this was the situation of the students who fixed public things). In this chapter, I've used the term *field research* rather than the frequently used term *participant observation,* because field researchers need not always participate in what they're studying, though they usually will study it directly at the scene of the action. As Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman point out:

> The researcher may plan a role that entails varying degrees of "participantness"—that is, the degree of actual participation in daily life. At one extreme is the full participant, who goes about ordinary life in a role or set of roles constructed in the setting. At the other extreme is the complete observer, who engages not at all in social interaction and may even shun involvement in the world being studied. And, of course, all possible complementary mixes along the continuum are available to the researcher. —(1995:60)

The complete participant, in this sense, may be a genuine participant in what he or she is studying (for example, a participant in a campus demonstration) or may pretend to be a genuine participant. In any event, if you're acting as the complete participant, you would let people see you only as a participant, not as a researcher. For instance, if you're studying a group made up of uneducated and inarticulate people, it would not be appropriate for you to talk and act like a university professor or student.

This type of research introduces an ethical issue, one on which social researchers themselves are divided. Is it ethical to deceive the people you're studying, in the hope that they will confide in you in ways that they would not confide in you if you were an identified researcher? Do the potential benefits to be gained from the research offset such considerations? Although many professional associations have addressed this issue, the norms to be followed remain somewhat ambiguous when applied to specific situations.

Related to this ethical consideration is a scientific one. No researcher deceives his or her subjects solely for the purpose of deception. Rather, it's done in the belief that the data will be more valid and reliable—that the subjects will be more natural and honest if they do not know the researcher is doing a research project. If the people being studied know they're being studied, they might modify their behavior in a variety of ways. This problem is known as **reactivity.**

First, they might expel the researcher. Second, they might modify their speech and behavior to appear more respectable than would otherwise be the case. Third, the social process itself might be radically changed. Students making plans to burn down the university administration building, for example, might give up the plan altogether once they learn that one of their group is a social scientist conducting a research project.

On the other side of the coin, if you're a complete participant, you may affect what you're studying. To play the role of participant, you must participate. Yet, your participation may significantly affect the social process you're studying. Suppose, for example, that you're asked for your ideas about what the group should do next. No matter what you say, you will affect the process in some fashion. If the group follows your suggestion, your

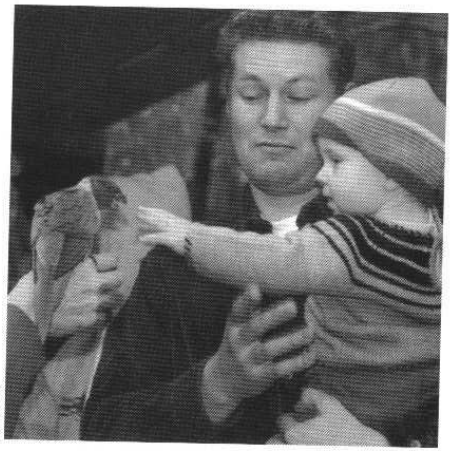
reactivity The problem that the subjects of social research may react to the fact of being studied, thus altering their behavior from what it would have been normally.

influence on the process is obvious. If the group decides not to follow your suggestion, the process whereby the suggestion is rejected may affect what happens next. Finally, if you indicate that you just don't know what should be done next, you may be adding to a general feeling of uncertainty and indecisiveness in the group.

Ultimately, anything the participant-observer does or does not do will have some effect on what's being observed; it's simply inevitable. More seriously, the research effort may have an important effect on what happens. There is no complete protection against this effect, though sensitivity to the issue may provide a partial protection. (This influence, called the Hawthorne effect, was discussed more fully in Chapter 8.)

Because of these ethical and scientific considerations, the field researcher frequently chooses a different role from that of complete participant. You could participate fully with the group under study but make it clear that you were also undertaking research. As a member of the volleyball team, for example, you might use your position to launch a study in the sociology of sports, letting your teammates know what you're doing. There are dangers in this role also, however. The people being studied may shift much of their attention to the research project rather than focus on the natural social process, so that the process being observed is no longer typical. Or, conversely, you yourself may come to identify too much with the interests and viewpoints of the participants. You may begin to "go native" and lose much of your scientific detachment.

At the other extreme, the complete observer studies a social process without becoming a part of it in any way. Quite possibly, because of the researcher's unobtrusiveness, the subjects of study might not realize they're being studied. Sitting at a bus stop to observe jaywalking at a nearby intersection is one example. Although the complete observer is less likely to affect what's being studied and less likely to "go native" than the complete participant, she or he is also less likely to develop a full appreciation of what's being studied. Observations may be more sketchy and transitory.



Earl Babbie

Field research is a hands-on process, which involves going to the scene of the action and checking it out.

Fred Davis (1973) characterizes the extreme roles that observers might play as "the Martian" and "the Convert." The latter involves delving deeper and deeper into the phenomenon under study, running the risk of "going native." We'll examine this risk further in the next section.

To appreciate the "Martian" approach, imagine that you were sent to observe some newfound life on Mars. Probably you would feel yourself inescapably separate from the Martians. Some social scientists adopt this degree of separation when observing cultures or social classes different from their own.

Marshall and Rossman (1995:60–61) also note that the researcher can vary the amount of time spent in the setting being observed; that is, researchers can be a full-time presence on the scene or just show up now and then. Moreover, they can focus their attention on a limited aspect of the social setting or seek to observe all of it—framing an appropriate role to match their aims.

Different situations ultimately require different roles for the researcher. Unfortunately, there are no clear guidelines for making this choice—you must rely on your understanding of the situation and your own good judgment. In making your decision, however, you must be guided by both methodological and ethical considerations. Because these often conflict, your decision will frequently be difficult, and you may find sometimes that your role limits your study.

Relations to Subjects

Having introduced the different roles field researchers might play in connection with their observations, we now focus more specifically on how researchers may relate to the subjects of their study and to the subjects' points of view.

We've already noted the possibility of pretending to occupy social statuses we don't really occupy. Consider now how you would think and feel in such a situation.

Suppose you've decided to study a religious cult that has enrolled many people in your neighborhood. You might study the group by joining it or pretending to join it. Take a moment to ask yourself what the difference is between "really" joining and "pretending" to join. The main difference is whether or not you actually take on the beliefs, attitudes, and other points of view shared by the "real" members. If the cult members believe that Jesus will come next Thursday night to destroy the world and save the members of the cult, do you believe it or do you simply pretend to believe it?

Traditionally, social scientists have tended to emphasize the importance of "objectivity" in such matters. In this example, that injunction would be to avoid getting swept up in the beliefs of the group. Without denying the advantages associated with such objectivity, social scientists today also recognize the benefits gained by immersing themselves in the points of view they're studying, what Lofland and associates (2006:70) refer to as "selective competence" or "insider knowledge, skill, or understanding." Ultimately, you will not be able to fully understand the thoughts and actions of the cult members unless you can adopt their points of view as true—at least temporarily. To fully appreciate the phenomenon you've set out to study, you need to believe that Jesus is coming Thursday night. In some settings, this can also help you gain rapport with your subjects.

Adopting an alien point of view is an uncomfortable prospect for most people. It can be hard enough merely to learn about views that seem strange to you; you may sometimes find it hard just to tolerate certain views; but to take them on as your own is ten times worse. Robert Bellah (1970, 1974) has offered the term *symbolic realism* to indicate the need for social researchers to treat the beliefs they study as worthy of respect rather than as objects of ridicule. If you seriously entertain this prospect, you may appreciate why William Shaffir and Robert Stebbins (1991:1) concluded that "fieldwork must certainly rank with the more disagreeable activities that humanity has fashioned for itself."

There is, of course, a danger in adopting the points of view of the people you're studying. When you abandon your objectivity in favor of adopting such views, you lose the possibility of seeing and understanding the phenomenon within frames of reference unavailable to your subjects. On the one hand, accepting the belief that the world will end Thursday night allows you to appreciate aspects of that belief available only to believers; stepping outside that view, however, makes it possible for you to consider some reasons why people might adopt such a view. You may discover that some did so as a consequence of personal trauma (such as unemployment or divorce) whereas others were brought into the fold through their participation in particular social networks (for example, their whole bowling team joined the cult). Notice that the cult members might disagree with those "objective" explanations, and you might not come up with them to the extent that you had operated legitimately within the group's views.

Anthropologists sometimes use the term *emic perspective* in reference to taking on the point of view of those being studied. In contrast, the *etic perspective* maintains a distance from the native point of view in the interest of achieving more objectivity.

The apparent dilemma here is that both of these postures offer important advantages but also seem mutually exclusive. In fact, you can assume both postures. Sometimes you can simply shift viewpoints at will. When appropriate, you can fully assume the beliefs of the cult; later, you can step outside those beliefs (more accurately, you can step inside the viewpoints associated with social science). As you become more adept at this kind of research, you may come to hold contradictory viewpoints simultaneously, rather than switch back and forth.

During my study of trance channeling—people who allow spirits to occupy their bodies and speak through them—I found I could participate fully in channeling sessions without becoming alienated from conventional social science. Rather than "believing" in the reality of channeling, I found it possible to suspend beliefs in that realm: neither believing it to be genuine (like most of the other participants) nor disbelieving it (like most scientists). Put differently, I was open to either possibility. Notice how this differs from our normal need to "know" whether such things are legitimate or not.

Social researchers often refer to the concerns just discussed as a matter of *reflexivity,* in the sense of things acting on themselves. Thus, your own characteristics can affect what you see and how you interpret it. The issue is broader than that, however, and applies to the subjects as well as to the researcher. Imagine yourself interviewing a homeless person (1) on the street, (2) in a homeless shelter, or (3) in a social welfare office. The research setting could affect the person's responses. In other words, you might get different results because of where you conducted the interview. Moreover, you might act differently as a researcher in those different settings. If you reflect on this issue, you'll be able to identify other aspects of the research encounter that complicate the task of "simply observing what's so."

The problem we've just been discussing could be seen as psychological, occurring mostly inside the researchers' or subjects' heads. There is a corresponding problem at a social level, however. When you become deeply involved in the lives of the people you're studying, you're likely to be moved by their personal problems and crises. Imagine, for example, that one of the cult members becomes ill and needs a ride to the hospital. Should you provide transportation? Sure. Suppose someone wants to borrow money to buy a stereo. Should you loan it? Probably not. Suppose they need the money for food?

There are no black-and-white rules for resolving situations such as these, but you should realize that you will need to deal with them regardless of whether or not you reveal that you're a researcher. Such problems do not tend to arise in other types of research—surveys and experiments, for example—but they are part and parcel of field research.

This discussion of the field researcher's relations to subjects flies in the face of the conventional view of "scientific objectivity." Before concluding this section, let's take the issue one step further.

In the conventional view of science, there are implicit differences of power and status separating the researcher from the subjects of research. When we discussed experimental designs in Chapter 8, for example, who was in charge was obvious: The experimenter organized things and told the subjects what to do. Often the experimenter was the only person who even knew what the research was really about. Something similar might be said about survey research. The person running the survey designs the questions, decides who will be selected for questioning, and is responsible for making sense out of the data collected.

Sociologists often look at these sorts of relationships as power or status relationships. In experimental and survey designs, the researcher clearly has more power and a higher status than do the people being studied. The researchers have a special knowledge that the subjects do not enjoy. They are not so crude as to say they are superior to their subjects, but there is a sense in which that's implicitly assumed. (Notice that there is a similar, implicit assumption about the writers and readers of textbooks.)

In field research, such assumptions can be problematic. When the early European anthropologists set out to study what were originally called "primitive" societies, there was no question that the anthropologists knew best. Whereas

the natives "believed" in witchcraft, for example, the anthropologists "knew" it wasn't really true. And whereas the natives said some of their rituals would appease the gods, the anthropologists explained that the "real" functions of these rituals were the creation of social identity, the establishment of group solidarity, and so on.

The more social researchers have gone into the field to study their fellow humans face-to-face, however, the more they have become conscious of these implicit assumptions about researcher superiority, and the more they have considered alternatives. As we turn now to the various paradigms of field research, we'll see some of the ways in which that ongoing concern has worked itself out.

SOME QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH PARADIGMS

Although I've described field research as simply going where the action is and observing it, there are actually many different approaches to this research method. This section examines several field research paradigms: naturalism, ethnomethodology, grounded theory, case studies and the extended case method, institutional ethnography, and participatory action research. Although this survey won't exhaust the variations on the method, it should give you a broad appreciation of the possibilities.

There are no specific methods attached to each of these paradigms. You could do ethnomethodology or institutional ethnography by analyzing court hearings or conducting group interviews, for example. The important distinctions of this section are *epistemological,* that is, having to do with what data mean, regardless of how they were collected.

Naturalism

Naturalism is an old tradition in qualitative research. The earliest field researchers operated on the positivist assumption that social reality was "out there," ready to be naturally observed and reported by the researcher as it "really is" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). This tradition started in the 1930s and 1940s at the University of Chicago's sociology department, whose faculty and students fanned out across the city to observe and understand local neighborhoods and communities. The researchers of that era and their research approach are now often referred to as the Chicago School.

One of the earliest and best-known studies that illustrates this research tradition is William Foote Whyte's ethnography of Cornerville, an Italian American neighborhood, in his book *Street Corner Society* (1943). An **ethnography** is a study that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation. Like other naturalists, Whyte believed that in order to fully learn about social life on the streets, he needed to become more of an insider. He made contact with "Doc," his key informant, who appeared to be one of the street-gang leaders. Doc let Whyte enter his world, and Whyte got to participate in the activities of the people of Cornerville. His study offered something that surveys could not: a richly detailed picture of life among the Italian immigrants of Cornerville.

An important feature of Whyte's study is that he reported the reality of the people of Cornerville on their terms. The naturalist approach is based on telling "their" stories the way they "really are," not the way the ethnographer understands "them." The narratives collected by Whyte are taken at face value as the social "truth" of the Cornerville residents.

Forty years later, David Snow and Leon Anderson (1987) conducted exploratory field research into the lives of homeless people in Austin, Texas. Their main task was to understand how the homeless construct and negotiate their identity while knowing that the society they live in attaches a stigma to homelessness. Snow and Anderson believed that, to achieve this goal, the collection of data had to arise naturally. Like Whyte in *Street Corner Society,* they found some key informants whom they followed in their everyday journeys,

naturalism An approach to field research based on the assumption that an objective social reality exists and can be observed and reported accurately.

ethnography A report on social life that focuses on detailed and accurate description rather than explanation.

such as at their day-labor pickup sites or under bridges. Snow and Anderson chose to memorize the conversations they participated in or the "talks" that homeless people had with each other. At the end of the day, the two researchers debriefed and wrote detailed field notes about all the "talks" they encountered. They also taped in-depth interviews with their key informants.

Snow and Anderson reported "hanging out" with homeless people over the course of 12 months for a total of 405 hours in 24 different settings. Out of these rich data, they identified three related patterns in homeless people's conversations. First, the homeless showed an attempt to "distance" themselves from other homeless people, from the low-status job they currently had, or from the Salvation Army they depended on. Second, they "embraced" their street-life identity—their group membership or a certain belief about why they are homeless. Third, they told "fictive stories" that always contrasted with their everyday life. For example, they would often say that they were making much more money than they really were, or even that they were "going to be rich."

Richard Mitchell (2002) offers another, timely illustration of the power of ethnographic reporting. Recent U.S. history has raised the specter of violence from secretive survivalist groups, dramatized by the 1992 siege at Ruby Ridge, Idaho, which left the wife and son of the white supremacist Randy Weaver dead; the 1993 shootout with David Koresh and his Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas; and Timothy McVeigh's 1995 bombing, which left 168 dead under the rubble of the nine-story Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City.

Mitchell describes a variety of survivalist individuals and groups, seeking to understand their reasoning, their plans, and the threat they may pose for the rest of us. Although he finds the survivalists disillusioned with and uncertain about the future of U.S. society, most are more interested in creating alternative lives and cultures for themselves than in blowing up the mainstream society. That's not to suggest none of the survivalists are a threat, but Mitchell's examination moves beyond the McVeighs, Koreshes, and Weavers to draw a broader picture of the whole phenomenon.

In Chapter 9, we saw how the Internet is affecting survey research. Eric Anderson (2005) used the Internet to launch a qualitative, in-depth interviewing study of male cheerleaders: "Twelve collegiate male cheerleaders were contacted for interviews by using the member profile search on American Online which provides a search engine for accessing the stated interests of AOL's 33 million subscribers. After communicating with these cheerleaders through instant messaging, I asked them for in-depth, taped telephone interviews" (2005:340). Anderson then used snowball sampling to increase the number of cheerleaders to study.

Whereas this chapter aims at introducing you to some of the different approaches available to you in qualitative field research, please realize that this discussion of ethnography merely sketches some of the many avenues social researchers have established. If you're interested in this general approach, you might want to explore the idea of *virtual ethnography,* which uses ethnographic techniques for inquiry into cyberspace. Or, in a different direction, *autoethnography* intentionally assumes a personal stance, breaking with the general proscription against the researcher getting involved at that level. You can learn more about these variants on ethnography by searching the web or your campus library. A later section of this chapter will examine *institutional ethnography,* which links individuals and organizations.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology, which I introduced as a research paradigm in Chapter 2, is a unique approach to qualitative field research. It has its roots in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which can explain why ethnomethodologists are skeptical about the way people report their experience of reality (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Alfred Schutz (1967, 1970), who introduced phenomenology, argued that reality was socially constructed rather than being "out there" for us to observe. People describe their world not "as it is" but "as they make sense of it." Thus, phenomenologists would argue that Whyte's street-corner men were describing their gang life as it made sense to them. Their reports, however, would not tell us how and why it made sense to them. For this reason, researchers cannot rely on their subjects' stories to depict social realities accurately.

ethnomethodology An approach to the study of social life that focuses on the discovery of implicit, usually unspoken assumptions and agreements; this method often involves the intentional breaking of agreements as a way of revealing their existence.

Whereas traditional ethnographers believe in immersing themselves in a particular culture and reporting their informants' stories as if they represent reality, phenomenologists see a need to "make sense" out of the informants' perceptions of the world. Following in this tradition, some field researchers have tried to devise techniques that reveal how people make sense of their everyday world. As we saw in Chapter 2, the sociologist Harold Garfinkel suggested that researchers "break the rules" so that people's taken-for-granted expectations would become apparent. This is the technique that Garfinkel called ethnomethodology.

Garfinkel became known for engaging his students to perform a series of "breaching experiments" designed to break away from the ordinary (Heritage 1984). For instance, Garfinkel (1967) asked his students to do a "conversation clarification experiment." Students were told to engage in an ordinary conversation with an acquaintance or a friend and to ask for clarification about any of this person's statements. Through this technique, they uncovered elements of conversation that are normally taken for granted. Here are two examples of what Garfinkel's students reported—(1967:42):

Case 1

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject's car pool, about having had a flat tire while going to work the previous day.

(S) I had a flat tire.

(E) What do you mean, you had a flat tire?

She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: "What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question."

Case 6

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

(S) How are you?

(E) How I am in regard of what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my . . . ?

(S) (Red in the face and suddenly out of control.) Look I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

By setting aside or "bracketing" their expectations from these everyday conversations, the experimenters made visible the subtleties of mundane interactions. For example, although "How are you?" has many possible meanings, none of us have any trouble knowing what it means in casual interactions, as the unsuspecting subject revealed in his final comment.

Ethnomethodologists, then, are not simply interested in subjects' perceptions of the world. In these cases, we could imagine that the subjects may have thought that the experimenters were rude, stupid, or arrogant. The conversation itself, not the informants, becomes the object of ethnomethodological studies. In general, in ethnomethodology the focus is on the "underlying patterns" of interactions that regulate our everyday lives.

Ethnomethodologists believe that researchers who use a naturalistic analysis "[lose] the ability to analyze the commonsense world and its culture if [they use] analytical tools and insights that are themselves part of the world or culture being studied" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:43). D. L. Wieder has provided an excellent example of how much a naturalistic approach differs from an ethnomethodological approach (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). In his study, *Language and Social Reality: The Case of Telling the Convict Code* (1988), Wieder started to approach convicts in a halfway house in a traditional ethnographic style: He was going to become an insider by befriending the inmates and by con-

ducting participant observations. He took careful notes and recorded interactions among inmates and between inmates and staff. His first concern was to describe the life of the convicts of the halfway house the way it "really was" for them. Wieder's observations allowed him to report on a "convict code" that he thought was the source of the deviant behavior expressed by the inmates toward the staff. This code, which consisted of a series of rules such as "Don't kiss ass," "Don't snitch," and "Don't trust the staff," was followed by the inmates who interfered with the staff members' attempts to help them make the transition from prison to the community.

It became obvious to Wieder that the code was more than an explanation for the convicts' deviant behavior; it was a "method of moral persuasion and justification" (Wieder 1988:175). At this point he changed his naturalistic approach to an ethnomethodological one. Recall that whereas naturalistic field researchers aim to understand social life as the participants understand it, ethnomethodologists are more intent on identifying the methods through which understanding occurs. In the case of the convict code, Wieder came to see that convicts used the code to make sense of their own interactions with other convicts and with the staff. The ethnography of the halfway house thus shifted to an ethnography of the code. For instance, the convicts would say, "You know I won't snitch," referring to the code as a way to justify their refusal to answer Wieder's question (1988:168). According to Wieder, the code "operated as a device for stopping or changing the topic of conversation" (1988:175). Even the staff would refer to the code to justify their reluctance to help the convicts. Although the code was something that constrained behavior, it also functioned as a tool for the control of interactions.

grounded theory An inductive approach to the study of social life that attempts to generate a theory from the constant comparing of unfolding observations. This differs greatly from hypothesis testing, in which theory is used to generate hypotheses to be tested through observations.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory originated from the collaboration of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, sociologists who brought together two main traditions of research: positivism and interactionism. Essentially, **grounded theory** is the attempt to derive theories from an analysis of the patterns, themes, and common categories discovered in observational data. The first major presentation of this method can be found in Glaser and Strauss's book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Grounded theory can be described as an approach that attempts to combine a naturalist approach with a positivist concern for a "systematic set of procedures" in doing qualitative research.

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998:43–46) have suggested that grounded theory allows the researcher to be scientific and creative at the same time, as long as the researcher follows these guidelines:

- *Think Comparatively:* The authors suggest that researchers must compare numerous incidents as a way of avoiding the biases that can arise from interpretations of initial observations.
- *Obtain Multiple Viewpoints:* In part this refers to the different points of view of participants in the events under study, but Strauss and Corbin suggest that different observational techniques may also provide a variety of viewpoints.
- *Periodically Step Back:* As data accumulate, you'll begin to frame interpretations about what is going on, and it's important to keep checking your data against those interpretations. As Strauss and Corbin (1998:45) say, "The data themselves do not lie."
- *Maintain an Attitude of Skepticism:* As you begin to interpret the data, you should regard all those interpretations as provisional, using new observations to *test* those interpretations, not just confirm them.
- *Follow the Research Procedures:* Grounded theory allows for flexibility in data collection as theories evolve, but Strauss and Corbin (1998:46) stress that three techniques are essential: "making comparisons, asking questions, and sampling."

Grounded theory emphasizes research procedures. In particular, systematic coding is important for achieving validity and reliability in the data analysis. Because of this somewhat positivistic view of data, grounded theorists are quite open to the use of qualitative studies in conjunction with quantitative ones. Here are two examples of the implementation of this approach.

Studying Academic Change Clifton F. Conrad's (1978) study of academic change in universities is an early example of the grounded theory approach. Conrad hoped to uncover the major sources of changes in academic curricula and at the same time understand the process of change. Using the grounded theory idea of *theoretical sampling*—whereby groups or institutions are selected on the basis of their theoretical relevance—Conrad chose four universities for the purpose of his study. In two, the main vehicle of change was the formal curriculum committee; in the other two, the vehicle was an ad hoc group.

Conrad explained, step by step, the advantage of using the grounded theory approach in building his theory of academic change. He described the process of systematically coding data in order to create categories that must "emerge" from the data and then assessing the fitness of these categories in relation to one other. Going continuously from data to theory and theory to data allowed him to reassess the validity of his initial conclusions about academic change.

For instance, it first seemed that academic change was caused mainly by an administrator who was pushing for it. By reexamining the data and looking for more-plausible explanations, Conrad found the pressure of interest groups a more convincing source of change. The emergence of these interest groups actually allowed the administrator to become an agent of change.

Assessing how data from each of the two types of universities fit with the other helped refine theory building. This refinement process stands in contrast to a naturalist approach, in which the process of building theory would have stopped with Conrad's first interpretation.

Conrad concluded that changes in university curricula are based on the following process: Conflict and interest groups emerge because of internal and external social structural forces; they push for administrative intervention and recommendation to make changes in the current academic program; these changes are then made by the most powerful decision-making body.

Shopping Romania Much has been written about large-scale changes caused by the shift from socialism to capitalism in the former USSR and its Eastern European allies. Patrick C. Jobes and his colleagues (1997) wanted to learn about the transition on a smaller scale among average Romanians. They focused on the task of shopping.

Noting that shopping is normally thought of as a routine, relatively rational activity, the researchers suggested that it could become a social problem in a radically changing economy. They used the grounded theory method to examine Romanian shopping as a social problem, looking for the ways in which ordinary people solved the problem.

Their first task was to learn something about how Romanians perceived and understood the task of shopping. The researchers—participants in a social problems class—began by interviewing 40 shoppers and asking whether they had experienced problems in connection with shopping and what actions they had taken to cope with those problems.

Once the initial interviews were completed, the researchers reviewed their data, looking for categories of responses—the shoppers' most common problems and solutions. One of the most common problems was a lack of money. This led to the researchers' first working hypothesis: The "socio-economic position of shoppers would be associated with how they perceived problems and

sought solutions" (Jobes et al. 1997:133). This and other hypotheses helped the researchers focus their attention on more-specific variables in subsequent interviewing.

As they continued, they also sought to interview other types of shoppers. When they interviewed students, for example, they discovered that different types of shoppers were concerned with different kinds of goods, which in turn affected the problems faced and the solutions tried.

As additional hypotheses were developed in response to the continued interviewing, the researchers began to develop a more or less standardized set of questions to ask shoppers. Initially, all the questions were open-ended, but they eventually developed closed-ended items as well.

This study illustrates the key, inductive principles of grounded theory: data are collected in the absence of hypotheses. The initial data are used to determine the key variables as perceived by those being studied, and hypotheses about relationships among the variables are similarly derived from the data collected. Continuing data collection yields refined understanding and, in turn, sharpens the focus of data collection itself.

Case Studies and the Extended Case Method

Social researchers often speak of **case studies,** which focus attention on one or a few instances of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang. As Charles Ragin and Howard Becker (1992) point out, there is little consensus on what constitutes a "case" and the term is used broadly. The case being studied, for example, might be a period of time rather than a particular group of people. The limitation of attention to a particular instance of something is the essential characteristic of the case study.

The chief purpose of a case study can be descriptive, as when an anthropologist describes the culture of a preliterate tribe. Or the in-depth study of a particular case can yield explanatory insights, as when the community researchers Robert and Helen Lynd (1929, 1937) and W. Lloyd Warner (1949) sought to understand the structure and process of social stratification in small-town USA.

Case study researchers may seek only an idiographic understanding of the particular case under examination, or—as we've seen with grounded theory—case studies can form the basis for the development of more general, nomothetic theories.

Michael Burawoy and his colleagues (1991) have suggested a somewhat different relationship between case studies and theory. For them, the **extended case method** has the purpose of discovering flaws in, and then modifying, existing social theories. This approach differs importantly from some of the others already discussed.

Whereas the grounded theorists seek to enter the field with no preconceptions about what they'll find, Burawoy suggests just the opposite: to try "to lay out as coherently as possible what we expect to find in our site *before* entry" (Burawoy et al. 1991:9). Burawoy sees the extended case method as a way to rebuild or improve theory instead of approving or rejecting it. Thus, he looks for all the ways in which observations conflict with existing theories and what he calls "theoretical gaps and silences" (1991:10). This orientation to field research implies that knowing the literature beforehand is actually a must for Burawoy and his colleagues, whereas grounded theorists would worry that knowing what others have concluded might bias their observations and theories.

To illustrate the extended case method, I'll use two examples of studies by Burawoy's students.

Teacher-Student Negotiations Leslie Hurst (1991) set out to study the patterns of interaction between teachers and students of a junior high school. She went into the field armed with existing, contradictory theories about the "official" functions of the school. Some theories suggested that the purpose of schools was to promote social mobility, whereas others suggested that schools mainly reproduced the status quo in the form of a stratified division of labor. The official roles assigned to teachers and students could be interpreted in terms of either view.

Hurst was struck, however, by the contrast between these theories and the types of interactions she observed in the classroom. In her own experiences as a student, teachers had total rights over the mind, body, and soul of their pupils. She observed something quite different at a school in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Berkeley, California—Emerald Junior High School, where she volunteered as a tutor. She had access to several classrooms, the lunchroom, and the English Department's meetings. She wrote field notes based on the negotiation interactions between students and teachers. She explained the nature of the student-teacher negotiations she witnessed, by focusing on the separation of functions among the school, the teacher, and the family.

In Hurst's observation, the school fulfilled the function of controlling its students' "bodies"—for example, by regulating their general movements and activities within the school. The students' "minds" were to be shaped by the teacher, whereas students' families were held responsible for their "souls"; that is, families were expected to socialize students regarding personal values, attitudes, sense of property, and sense of decorum. When students don't come to school with these values in hand, the teacher, according to Hurst, "must first negotiate with the students some compromise on how the students will conduct themselves and on what will be considered classroom decorum" —(1991:185).

Hurst explained the constant bargaining between teachers and students is an expression of the separation between "the body," which is the school's concern, and "the soul" as family domain. The teachers, who had limited sanctioning power to control their students' minds in the classroom, were using forms of negotiations with students so that they could "control . . . the student's body and sense of property" (1991:185), or as Hurst defines it, "babysit" the student's body and soul.

Hurst says she differs from the traditional sociological perspectives as follows:

> I do not approach schools with a futuristic eye. I do not see the school in terms of training, socializing, or slotting people into future hierarchies. To approach schools in this manner is to miss the negotiated, chaotic aspects of the classroom and educational experience. A futurist perspective tends to impose an order and purpose on the school experience, missing its day-to-day reality. —(1991:186)

In summary, what emerges from Hurst's study is an attempt to improve the traditional sociological understanding of education by adding the idea that classroom, school, and family have separate functions, which in turn can explain the emergence of "negotiated order" in the classroom.

The Fight against AIDS Katherine Fox (1991) set out to study an agency whose goal was to fight the AIDS epidemic by bringing condoms and bleach (for cleaning needles) to intravenous drug users. Her study offers a good example of finding the limitations of well-used models of theoretical explanation in the realm of understanding deviance—specifically, the "treatment model" that predicted that drug users would come to the clinic and ask for treatment. Fox's interactions with outreach workers—most of whom were part of the community of drug addicts or former prostitutes—contradicted that model.

To begin, it was necessary to understand the drug users' subculture and use that knowledge to devise more-realistic policies and programs. The target users had to be convinced, for example, that the program workers could be trusted, that they were really interested only in providing bleach and condoms. The target users needed to be sure they were not going to be arrested.

Fox's field research didn't stop with an examination of the drug users. She also studied the agency workers, discovering that the outreach program meant different things to the research directors and

case study The in-depth examination of a single instance of some social phenomenon, such as a village, a family, or a juvenile gang.

extended case method A technique developed by Michael Burawoy in which case study observations are used to discover flaws in and to improve existing social theories.

the outreach workers. Some of the volunteers who were actually providing the bleach and condoms were frustrated about the minor changes they felt they could make. Many thought the program was just a bandage on the AIDS and drug-abuse problems. Some resented having to take field notes. Directors, on the other hand, needed reports and field notes so that they could validate their research in the eyes of the federal and state agencies that financed the project. Fox's study showed how the AIDS research project developed the bureaucratic inertia typical of established organizations: Its goal became that of sustaining itself.

Both of these studies illustrate how the extended case method can operate. The researcher enters the field with full knowledge of existing theories but aims to uncover contradictions that require the modification of those theories.

One criticism of the case study method is the limited generalizability of what may be observed in a single instance of some phenomenon. This risk is reduced, however, when more than one case is studied in depth: the *comparative* case study method. You can find examples of this in the discussion of comparative and historical research methods in Chapter 11 of this book.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is an approach originally developed by Dorothy Smith (1978) to better understand women's everyday experiences by discovering the power relations that shape those experiences. Today this methodology has been extended to the ideologies that shape the experiences of any oppressed subjects.

Smith and other sociologists believe that if researchers ask women or other members of subordinated groups about "how things work," they can discover the institutional practices that shape their realities (M. L. Campbell 1998; D. Smith 1978). The goal of such inquiry is to uncover forms of oppression that more traditional types of research often overlook.

Smith's methodology is similar to ethnomethodology in the sense that the inquiry does not focus on the subjects themselves. The institutional ethnographer starts with the personal experiences of individuals but proceeds to uncover the institutional power relations that structure and govern those experiences. In this process, the researcher can reveal aspects of society that would have been missed by an inquiry that began with the official purposes of institutions.

This approach links the "microlevel" of everyday personal experiences with the "macrolevel" of institutions. As M. L. Campbell puts it:

> Institutional ethnography, like other forms of ethnography, relies on interviewing, observations and document as data. Institutional ethnography departs from other ethnographic approaches by treating those data not as the topic or object of interest, but as "entry" into the social relations of the setting. The idea is to tap into people's expertise. —(1998:57)

Here are two examples of this approach.

Mothering, Schooling, and Child Development Our first example of institutional ethnography is a study by Alison Griffith (1995), who collected data with Dorothy Smith on the relationship among mothering, schooling, and children's development. Griffith started by interviewing mothers from three cities of southern Ontario on their everyday work of creating a relationship between their families and the school. This was the starting point for other interviews with parents, teachers, school administrators, social workers, school psychologists, and central office administrators.

In her findings, Griffith explained how the discourse about mothering had shifted its focus over time from mother-child interactions to "child-centered" recommendations. She saw a distinct similarity in the discourse used by schools, the media (magazines and television programs), the state, and child development professionals.

Teachers and child development professionals saw the role of mothers in terms of a necessary collaboration between mothers and schools for the child's success not only in school but also in life. Because of unequal resources, all mothers do not participate in this discourse of "good" child development the same way. Griffith found that working-class mothers were perceived as weaker than middle-class mothers in the "stimulation" effort of schooling. Griffith argued that this child development discourse, embedded in the school institution, perpetuates the reproduction of class by making middle-class ideals for family-school relations the norm for everyone.

institutional ethnography A research technique in which the personal experiences of individuals are used to reveal power relationships and other characteristics of the institutions within which they operate.

Compulsory Heterosexuality The second illustration of institutional ethnography is taken from Didi Khayatt's (1995) study of the institutionalization of compulsory heterosexuality in schools and its effects on lesbian students. In 1990 Khayatt began her research by interviewing 12 Toronto lesbians, 15 to 24 years of age. Beginning with the young women's viewpoint, she then expanded her inquiry to other students, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators.

Khayatt found that the school's administrative practices generated a compulsory heterosexuality, which produced a sense of marginality and vulnerability among lesbian students. For example, the school didn't punish harassment and name-calling against gay students. The issue of homosexuality was excluded from the curriculum lest it appear to students as an alternative to heterosexuality.

In both of the studies I've described, the inquiry began with the women's standpoint—mothers and lesbian students. However, instead of emphasizing the subjects' viewpoints, both analyses focused on the power relations that shaped these women's experiences and reality.

Participatory Action Research

Our final field research paradigm takes us further along in our earlier discussion of the status and power relationships linking researchers to the subjects of their research. Within the **participatory action research** paradigm (PAR), the researcher's function is to serve as a resource to those being studied—typically, disadvantaged groups—as an opportunity for them to act effectively in their own interest. The disadvantaged subjects define their problems, define the remedies desired, and take the lead in designing the research that will help them realize their aims.

This approach began in Third World research development, but it spread quickly to Europe and North America (Gaventa 1991). It comes from a vivid critique of classical social science research. According to the PAR paradigm, traditional research is an "elitist model" (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991) that reduces the "subjects" of research to "objects" of research. According to many advocates of this perspective, the distinction between the researcher and the researched should disappear. They argue that the subjects who will be affected by research should also be responsible for its design.

Implicit in this approach is the belief that research functions not only as a means of knowledge production but also as a "tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for action" (Gaventa 1991:121–22). Advocates of participatory action research equate access to information with power and argue that this power has been kept in the hands of the dominant class, sex, ethnicity, or nation. Once people see themselves as researchers, they automatically regain power over knowledge.

Participatory action research poses a special challenge to researchers. On the one hand, a central intention is to empower participants to frame research relevant to their needs, as they define those needs. At the same time, the researcher brings special skills and insights that nonresearchers lack. So, who should be in charge? Andrew J. Sense (2006:1) suggests that this decision may have to be made in the moment, varying by particular circumstances: "Do I take the 'passenger' position on the bus or do I take the 'driver' seat and be a little more provocative to energise the

participatory action research An approach to social research in which the people being studied are given control over the purpose and procedures of the research; intended as a counter to the implicit view that researchers are superior to those they study.

session. My view at this moment is to judge it on the day."

Examples of the PAR approach include community power structure research, corporate research, and "right-to-know" movements (Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes 1991). Here are three more-detailed examples of research that used a PAR approach.

The Xerox Corporation A participatory action research project took place at the Xerox corporation at the instigation of leaders of both management and the union. Management's goal was to lower costs so that the company could thrive in an increasingly competitive market. The union suggested a somewhat broader scope: improving the quality of working life while lowering manufacturing costs and increasing productivity.

Company managers began by focusing attention on shop-level problems; they were less concerned with labor contracts or problematic managerial policies. At the time, management had a plan to start an "outsourcing" program that would lay off 180 workers, and the union had begun mobilizing to oppose the plan. Peter Lazes, a consultant hired by Xerox, spent the first month convincing management and the union to create a "cost study team" (CST) that included workers in the wire harness department.

Eight full-time workers were assigned to the CST for six months. Their task was to study the possibilities of making changes that would save the company $3.2 million and keep the 180 jobs. The team had access to all financial information and was authorized to call on anyone within the company. This strategy allowed workers to make suggestions outside the realm usually available to them. According to Whyte and his colleagues, "reshaping the box enabled the CST to call upon management to explain and justify all staff services" (1991:27). Because of the changes suggested by the CST and implemented by management, the company saved the targeted $3.2 million.

Management was so pleased by this result that it expanded the wire harness CST project to three other departments that were threatened by competition. Once again, management was happy about the money saved by the teams of workers.

The Xerox case study is interesting because it shows how the production of knowledge does not always have to be an elitist enterprise. The "experts" do not necessarily have to be the professionals. According to Whyte and his colleagues, "at Xerox, participatory action research created and guided a powerful process of organizational learning—a process whereby leaders of labor and management learned from each other and from the consultant/facilitator, while he learned from them" —(1991:30).

PAR and Welfare Policy Participatory action research often involves poor people, as they are typically less able than others to influence the policies and actions that affect their lives. Bernita Quoss, Margaret Cooney, and Terri Longhurst (2000) report a research project involving welfare policy in Wyoming. University students, many of them welfare recipients, undertook research and lobbying efforts aimed at getting Wyoming to accept post-secondary education as "work" under the state's new welfare regulations.

This project began against the backdrop of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (PRWORA), which

> eliminated education waivers that had been available under the previous welfare law, the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA). These waivers had permitted eligible participants in the cash assistance AFDC program to attend college as an alternative to work training requirements. Empirical studies of welfare participants who received these waivers have provided evidence that education, in general, is the most effective way to stay out of poverty and achieve self-sufficiency. —(Quoss, Cooney, and Longhurst 2000:47)

The students began by establishing an organization, Empower, and making presentations on campus to enlist broad student and faculty support. They compiled existing research relevant to the issue and established relationships with members of the state legislature. By the time the 1997 legislative session opened, they were actively engaged in the process of modifying state welfare laws to take account of the shift in federal policy.

The students prepared and distributed fact sheets and other research reports that would be relevant to the legislators' deliberations. They attended committee meetings and lobbied legislators on a one-to-one basis. When erroneous or misleading data were introduced into the discussions, the student-researchers were on hand to point out the errors and offer corrections.

Ultimately, they were successful. Welfare recipients in Wyoming were allowed to pursue post-secondary education as an effective route out of poverty.

Some researchers speak of **emancipatory research,** which Ardha Danieli and Carol Woodhams (2005:284) define as "first and foremost a process of producing knowledge which will be of benefit to oppressed people; a political outcome." Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used to pursue this goal, but it goes well beyond simply learning what's so, even as seen from the subjects' point of view. The authors focus on the study of disability, and they note similarities in the development of emancipatory research and early feminist research. See the box "Pencils and Photos in the Hands of Research Subjects" for more on this topic.

Blocking a Demolition In another example of researchers being directly involved in what they study, John Lofland (2003) detailed the demolition of a historic building in Davis, California, and community attempts to block the demolition. One thing that makes his book especially unusual is its reliance on photographs and facsimile news articles and government documents as raw data for the analysis (and for the reader): what Lofland refers to as "documentary sociology."

As Lofland explains, he was involved in the issue first as an active participant, joining with other community members in the attempt to block demolition of the Hotel Aggie (also known as the "Terminal Building" and "Terminal Hotel"). Built in 1924 in a town of around a thousand inhabitants, the hotel fell victim to population growth and urban development. Lofland says his role as researcher began on September 18, 2000, as the demolition of the building began.

> Before that, I was only and simply an involved citizen. Along with many other people, I was attempting to preserve the Terminal Building in some manner. This also explains why there are so few photographs in this book taken by me before that date, but many after that date. I had then begun seriously to document what was going on with a camera and field notes.
>
> Therefore, questions of "informed consent" (now so often raised regarding research) were not pertinent before September 18. After that day, it was my practice to indicate to everyone I encountered that I was "writing a book" about the building. —(Lofland 2003:20)

Recall the discussion of informed consent in Chapter 3, a method of protecting research subjects. In this case, as Lofland notes elsewhere, explicit consent was not necessarily needed here because the behavior being studied was public. Still his instincts as a social researcher were to ensure that he treat subjects appropriately.

One of Lofland's purposes was to study this failed attempt to secure "historic preservation" status for a building, thus providing useful information to activists in the future. This indicates that there can be many different forms of participatory action research.

At the same time, this is a valuable case for a study of research methods, because Lofland, as the author of research methods textbooks, is particularly sensitive to the methodological aspects of the study.

> The depth and intensity of my involvement is a two-edged sword. On the one edge, my involvement provided me with a view closer

emancipatory research Research conducted for the purpose of benefiting disadvantaged groups.

ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

PENCILS AND PHOTOS IN THE HANDS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

How would you go about studying the life conditions of Peruvian Indians living in the Amazon rainforest? With a minimal telecommunications infrastructure and a slow ferry-based postal service in the vast region, a mail or telephone survey wouldn't be the best approach. It might occur to you to conduct in-depth interviews in which you would work from an outline of topics to be covered. Arvind Singhal and Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty (2006) opted for a very different approach, which put the subjects of study more in control of the research and allowed for important but unexpected discoveries. They derived their inspiration from the work of the renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, who once set out to measure exploitation among street children. Instead of interviewing them, he gave them cameras and asked them to bring back photographs of exploitation. As Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty report:

> One child took a photo of a nail on a wall. It made no sense to adults, but other children were in strong agreement. The ensuing discussions showed that many young boys of that neighborhood worked in the shoe-shine business. Their clients were mainly in the city, not in the barrio where they lived. As their shoe-shine boxes were too heavy for them to carry, these boys rented a nail on a wall (usually in a shop), where they could hang their boxes for the night. To them, that nail on the wall represented "exploitation." The "nail on the wall" photograph spurred widespread discussions in the Peruvian barrio about other forms of institutionalized exploitation, including ways to overcome them. —(2006:314)

Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty's research involved gauging the quality of life in the Peruvian Amazon and assessing the impact of programs launched by a Peruvian nongovernmental organization (NGO), Minga Peru. To view society through the eyes of children, the researchers set up drawing sessions with colored pencils. In the spirit of reciprocity, one of the authors sketched pictures of snowmen and jack-o'-lanterns that were a part of her childhood in the Midwest. In addition to depicting life in their villages and their close relationship with the natural environment, the children's sketches often featured examples of social change being brought about by development programs of the NGO.

> These include sketches of chicken coops, fish farms, and agro-forestry projects. These enterprises, all launched by Minga Peru, began in the Peruvian Amazon only in the past few years. For children to sketch these "new" initiatives in their pictures on their own, without prompts, is noteworthy. —(2006:322)

The photographs taken by the adult women were equally revealing. Several drew attention to the patriarchal social structure. As the authors report,

> Several photographs depicted the subservient position of the Amazonian women relative to men, a situation that Minga Peru seeks to address. For instance, Adela's picture shows a middle-aged Amazonian woman and her husband sitting on their porch and having a conversation. The woman, sporting a forlorn expression, sits with her legs crossed while her husband stares directly into the camera, squatting with his arms and feet spread in an open position. Especially noticeable is the physical distance of about 10 feet that separates the woman and the man. When Adela was asked why she took the picture and why were the man and woman sitting so far apart, she noted: "The woman is sitting at one side of the house and he is on the other and this was not anything unusual." Upon probing, we learned that Amazonian men determine how close the couple sits. If they are sitting closer, and if the man has his arm around his partner, it is his decision to do so. This authority also applies to initiation of sex: The man determines if and when sex will happen. —(2006:323–24)

This research not only illustrates some unusual data collection techniques, but it also represents the spirit of participatory action research, discussed in this chapter.

Source: Arvind Singhal and Elizabeth Rattine-Flaherty, "Pencils and Photos as Tools of Communicative Research and Praxis: Analyzing Minga Peru's Quest for Social Justice in the Amazon," *International Communication Gazette*, 2006, 68(4): 313-330.

than that of some other people. I was one type of "insider." This means I could gather data of certain sorts that were not available to the less involved.

On the other edge, my partisanship clearly poses the threat of bias. I have always been aware of this, and I have tried my best to correct for it. But, in the end, I cannot be the final judge. Each reader will have to form her or his own assessment. I can hope, however, that the "digital documentary" evidence I mention above helps the study tell itself, so to speak. It makes the reader less dependent on me than is the case with some other methods of representing what happened. —(Lofland 2003:20)

As you can see, the seemingly simple process of observing social action as it occurs has subtle though important variations. As we saw in Chapter 2, all our thoughts occur within, and are shaped by, paradigms, whether we're conscious of it or not. Qualitative field researchers have been unusually deliberate in framing a variety of paradigms to enrich the observation of social life.

CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE FIELD RESEARCH

So far in this chapter we've considered the kinds of topics appropriate to qualitative field research, special considerations in doing this kind of research, and a sampling of paradigms that direct different types of research efforts. Along the way we've seen some examples that illustrate field research in action. To round out the picture, we turn now to specific ideas and techniques for conducting field research, beginning with how researchers prepare for work in the field.

Preparing for the Field

Suppose for the moment that you've decided to undertake field research on a campus political organization. Let's assume further that you're not a member of that group, that you do not know a great deal about it, and that you will identify yourself to the participants as a researcher. To cover more of the activities common to research, we'll