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Fundamentals of Educational Research

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Search and Re-Search:

What the Inquiring Teacher Needs to Know

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Doing Qualitative Research:

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**Beginning Qualitative
Research**
A Philosophic and Practical Guide

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and

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London • Philadelphia

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Chapter 2

Before Beginning Research: A Philosophic Perspective

Why is qualitative research and not quantitative research in the minority status? Why is it necessary to present a philosophic perspective on qualitative research and not on quantitative research? While this is not the place to present an extended history of research, let us just say that when experimental methods were first introduced as a challenge to the scholastic methods, a rigorous and philosophic defense of the experimental methods were required. Qualitative methods still face that challenge, because the philosophic underpinnings are not widely understood. If the underlying philosophy is not understood, the new orientation, in this case qualitative research, is seen as a less rigorous and less valued way of doing inquiry.

For good or ill, the human sciences, as seen by the positivists, have often taken their lead from physics and chemistry. This connection to the natural sciences, from at least the time of Newton, has been dominated by a belief in objective observation, quantifiable data and verifiable truths. Evelyn Fox Keller in *Reflections on Gender and Science* (1985) argues that this way of doing science is related to a patriarchal view of the world. We support Fox's position that the patriarchal view of science has marginalized all ways of doing science which are not like the ways that natural science has been traditionally done, that is, any non-experimental, non-objective ways of doing science. Recently, this newer view of science has been challenged by new ways of doing natural science (especially physics), feminist theory, and post-modern sensibilities (Habermas, 1989; Heisenberg, 1958; Keller, 1985; West, 1989). These alternate voices have contributed to making qualitative research an acceptable way of doing science. At the same time that these perspectives were beginning to be articulated, other challenges were mounted on the traditional methods within educational research (Campbell, 1975; Stake, 1978).

Historically, qualitative research can be seen as marginalized in both its participants (subjects as defined by traditional science) and by its methodology. We will begin by looking at the participants of early

qualitative studies. Cultural anthropologists were among the first and best known qualitative researchers. Until recently anthropologists studied 'primitive' peoples almost exclusively. While anthropologists often argued that the participants in their studies should not be considered primitive, they continued their almost exclusive examination of these participants and therefore kept their subjects marginalized. Freud and Piaget, whom we would include under the broad category of qualitative researchers, studied neurotic women and children respectively: Two groups on the margins of the male patriarchal scientific culture. The Chicago School of Sociology studied street gangs and institutionalized persons. More recently, qualitative methods have been used to study the educational process in elementary, secondary and university settings. As a part of the look at education and students, William Perry (1970) examined the intellectual and moral changes in Harvard males and, by studying a group of persons valued by the dominant society, helped to move qualitative research closer to the center of serious research.

Qualitative research methods also began at the margins of acceptable science. From Freud on, qualitative researchers have been presenting their findings in language which did not directly challenge the traditional ways of doing science. Anthropologists, for example, did not even suggest that their method might be used by other social science disciplines. Freud, as a medical doctor, wrote case studies and, while using the knowledge gained from his work with patients as a part of his theory building, he placed his theories within a medical or literary context, rather than making his case from a careful examination of his case studies. In fact, it is not until the pioneering work of Carl Rogers that transcripts of therapy were brought out for public inspection (Rogers, 1942; 1951). From a different perspective, Piaget's clinical interview method began to break into mainstream science with the power of his theoretical work, rather than by a solid presentation of his method. Developmental psychologists such as Mary Ainsworth (1979) have examined mother-child relationships using qualitative methods but have not made a strong case for a qualitative approach. It is surprising that methods until very recently have not been presented as a part of the research reports; the reader was left in the dark about how the researcher came to the conclusion that she did.

In fact, it is difficult to re-evaluate older qualitative studies by examining the way the researchers analyzed their data. Even recent qualitative studies such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1985) and *In a Different Voice* (Gilligan, 1982) provided little methodological information. One is left with the impression

that there are no rigorous ways of collecting and analyzing qualitative data—qualitative research, one is led to believe by this lack of information, must be intuitive, and perhaps qualitative methods are not a part of good science.

As we will show shortly, this is not the case. But before making the case for a rigorous qualitative methodology, we will briefly look at Kuhn's view of the sociology of science as it relates to qualitative research.

Paradigms and Research

To further our understanding of the current status of qualitative research, we will briefly examine the implications of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) and extend Kuhn's argument by placing research methods within this framework. Kuhn (1962) first introduced the concept of paradigm into the history and sociology of science. Kuhn discusses two phases or periods of research in science: normal and revolutionary. Research during periods of normal science can be thought of as solving a puzzle within a general pattern already outlined by the major theories of that science. As more and more of the pieces of the puzzle are put together, Kuhn argues, some of them do not fit. In other words, a researcher might find out some new bits of information which have been verified by the methods of the science but which do not fit into the prevailing paradigms. Kuhn calls these misfit bits of information and research findings anomalies. As a researcher finds data which are verified using acceptable methods but that do not support existing theories, it becomes more and more difficult to support those theories. The reason for this is that a theory is held together by the way in which all or most of the the data about that question supports the larger picture.

The relationship between theory, postulates, and paradigms is a complex one. While Kuhn's work on the history of science is widely known, what is less widely known is that a major shift has to also occur in the methodology of science, in the way science is researched. Kuhn's ideas regarding normal and revolutionary science should also be applied to the research methods of a discipline. The dominant method of science today we will refer to as the traditional method.

Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba's *Naturalistic Inquiry* (1985), which is elaborate in detail and comprehensive in its scope, plays an important role in the recognition of qualitative research as a legitimate way of doing research. They articulate the points raised by Kuhn regarding the shift in research methods within the history of science. Lincoln and

Guba's contribution to the acceptance of qualitative methods within the research community is extended by their articulation of the methodology of qualitative research in a rigorous way, taking their lead from an understanding of changes within the 'hard' sciences. They present qualitative research as a part of an emerging research paradigm which includes lessons taken from theoretical physics and mathematics. Lincoln and Guba work toward placing qualitative research on an equal footing with traditional scientific approaches (cf. Maxwell, 1990a; 1990b; Lincoln, 1990).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) present the philosophical basis for qualitative research as well as a set of techniques and methods for conducting research based on the implications of the new paradigm. Lincoln and Guba take a radical position on the nature of qualitative research and its relationship to traditional research arguing effectively that qualitative research is based on a fundamentally different set of axioms or postulates than is the dominant approach to research, that is, the positivists' position on research. This new set of assumptions or postulates constitutes what we call the alternate paradigm, that is, a paradigm for conducting research which is not yet fully developed.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) and others (Hesse, 1980; Schwartz & Ogilvy, 1979) call this traditional method the positivist paradigm. However, there is also an emerging approach to understanding the world which we call the qualitative approach and which Lincoln and Guba call the emerging paradigm (1985). Each of these approaches or paradigms to research is built on a very different set of underlying assumptions which are outlined below.

Postulates and Paradigms

The postulates of a research paradigm are regarded as self-evident truths in times of normal science (Kuhn, 1962). However, they are not self-evident during periods of rapid change or when there is a shift from one paradigm toward another. Postulates are only self-evident if there is not a competing frame of reference. A postulate, specifically, is something that is stipulated, that is, something given the status of acceptance in order to get on with the task at hand. The value of a postulate to restate is that it provides the bedrock on which to conduct research. O'Donohue (1989), in an article exploring new ways for training clinical psychologists, discusses the role of metaphysics in a similar way as Lincoln and Guba discuss the role of postulates under the name axioms.¹ O'Donohue states that a few metaphysical assumptions (read

postulates), though untestable themselves, provide a plausible foundation for doing research. These research methods are directly dependent on the untestable postulate for their legitimacy (O'Donohue, 1989: 1461).

The table below presents six questions about the nature of reality and ways of conducting research. These questions are answered by a set of postulates that make a claim for a way of conducting research. These postulates shape the way researchers approach problems, the methods they use to collect and analyze data, as well as the type of problems they choose to investigate. Table 2.1 lists the most salient differences between the two competing paradigms. The questions in the left column are central to solving problems which present themselves in planning a research project, analyzing the data, and in writing up the results of any study. The six philosophic questions in column one provide the basis for Table 2.1 which provides a capsule view of the different approaches to inquiry.

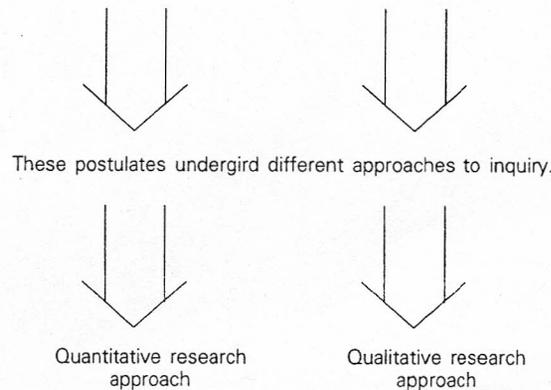
In discussing dominant paradigm and positivist position, we will use dominant paradigm and positivist position interchangeably and quantitative research resulting from the postulates of that paradigm. The alternate paradigm and the phenomenological position will also be used more or less interchangeably with qualitative research which follows from the postulates within that paradigm. A brief discussion of the postulates as they apply to qualitative research will extend our understanding of how the assumptions of the paradigm affect the outlook and behavior of the researcher. One rarely thinks about the nature of reality because in our day-to-day activities reality is a given. However, as Table 2.1 shows, to ask 'How does the world work?' as a philosophic question about reality affects the way we do research as well as other less rigorous forms of inquiry.

The way we understand the nature of reality directly affects the way we see ourselves in relation to knowledge. If knowledge can be separated into parts and examined individually, it follows that the knower or the researcher can stand apart from who or what he is examining. On the other hand, if knowledge is constructed, then the knower cannot be totally separated from what is known: The world is co-constituted. It follows from Postulate II that researchers within the two paradigms ask different questions and approach research in different ways.

In like manner, the researcher's understanding of causal links stems from the three postulates which come before it (Alternate paradigm I). If reality is multiple and constructed, it follows that the causal links will be mutual (that is, constructed) and that in terms of what an event of action means, the event is not unidirectional but multidirectional. This

Table 2.1: Postulates of the research paradigms

| Questions | Postulates of the positivist approach (The dominant paradigm) | Postulates of the phenomenological approach (An alternate paradigm) |
|--|--|--|
| I. How does the world work? | Reality is one. By carefully dividing and studying its parts, the whole can be understood. | There are multiple realities. These realities are socio-psychological constructions forming an interconnected whole. These realities can only be understood as such. |
| II. What is the relationship between the knower and the known? | The knower can stand outside of what is to be known. True objectivity is possible. | The knower and the known are interdependent. |
| III. What role do values play in understanding the world? | Values can be suspended in order to understand. | Values mediate and shape what is understood. |
| IV. Are causal linkages possible? | One event comes before another event and can be said to cause that event. | Events shape each other. Multidirectional relationships can be discovered. |
| V. What is the possibility of generalization? | Explanations from one time and place can be generalized to other times and places. | Only tentative explanations for one time and place are possible. |
| VI. What does research contribute to knowledge? | Generally, the positivist seeks verification or proof of propositions | Generally, the phenomenologist seeks to discover or uncover propositions. |



Liberalily adapted from Lincoln and Guba, 1985

perspective also has implications for how one looks at data or information which is gathered in the process of research. The qualitative researcher seeks patterns which come out of or emerge from the data. The quantitative researcher makes a guess or forms a hypothesis which is then used to test the data.

Values, the topic discussed in Postulate III, once again can be understood from the postulates which come before it. Values are embedded in the research, embedded in the topic chosen for examination, in the way the researcher examines the topic and in the researcher him or herself. If reality is constructed and the knower and the known are inseparable, then values come with the turf. On the other hand, if the world can be divided into parts and if the knower can stand outside of what is to be known than research can be value free.

Postulate IV asks about cause. The phenomenological approach views events as mutually shaped. Multidirectional relationships can be discovered within situations. Causes are not a prime focus as they are for positivist approach research. Causality is central to the dominant paradigm.

These two hypothetical researchers would, for example, look at the generalizations of their findings (Postulate V) very differently. Qualitative researchers value context sensitivity, that is, understanding a phenomena in all its complexity and within a particular situation and environment. The quantitative researchers works to eliminate all of the unique aspects of the environment in order to apply the results to the largest possible number of subjects and experiments.

Finally, one would expect different contributions to a body of knowledge (Postulate VI) given the intricate connection between and among the postulates. The positivist position on research has never been able to adequately explain how new knowledge is discovered. The positivist approach is oriented toward verifying what has been already discovered by other methods. The alternate paradigm, and the phenomenological position within it, is oriented toward discovery of salient propositions. Discovery of propositions by observation and the careful inspection of the patterns which emerge from the data are the hallmark of the phenomenological approach.

The complexity of things become apparent with attempts at explanation. The above discussion is illustrative: While the alternate paradigm looks to multidirectional, mutually shaped realities in order to explain them and to get individual points to stand out, methods such as tables are effective even though a table is also an organizational model for the traditional paradigm. It is important to realize that while the postulates of the positivist position are seen by their proponents as

Table 2.2: Research characteristics and trends in historic context

| Research Characteristic | Dominant Paradigm | Alternate Paradigm |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| World View | Simple → | Complex |
| Organization of information | Hierarchic → | Heterarchic |
| Forms of relationships | Mechanical → | Holographic |
| Sources of Change | Determined → | Indeterminate |
| Explanation | Linear causal → | Mutual causal |
| Nature of change | Assembly → | Morphogenesis |
| Observer perspective | Objective → | Perspectival |

Adapted from Lincoln and Guba, 1985

sequential and divisible into part, the postulates of the phenomenological position should be seen as interconnected and multidirectional.

Placing the research paradigms within a larger picture, Lincoln and Guba (1985) build on the work of Peter Schwartz and James Ogilvy in *The Emergent Paradigm: Changing Patterns of Thought and Belief* (1979). Lincoln and Guba argue that research methods are also subject to paradigm changes. They present an overview of the changing ways the research community views the underlying assumptions upon which research is based. Seven major characteristics are cited by Schwartz and Ogilvy as characteristics of the alternate position that are virtually diametrically opposed to those of the traditional position. Table 2.2 above illustrates the major characteristics and the trends which these researchers see. As the table indicates, many researchers see a paradigm shift occurring; they see a move from a traditional world-view toward an alternate world-view (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; O'Donohue, 1989; Schwartz and Ogilvy, 1979).

To better understand this paradigm shift let us explore briefly each of the research characteristics and their respective positions. The dominant paradigm, or the positivist position, sees the world as simple or at least potentially simple if it can be examined properly and broken apart correctly. In direct contrast, the phenomenological approach sees the world as complex and interconnected, thus research must maintain the complexity if the explanation is to be trustworthy. Next, the dominant paradigm's approach to research sees information organized in hierarchies, that is, something is always at the bottom (subordinate) and something is always at the top (superordinate). The phenomenological position on research sees information organized in heterarchies. A web of meaning is a good metaphor for a heterarchical organization of information. Closely related are the forms of relationships. Mechanical forms

of relationships characterize the traditional approach. These relationships (metaphorically) can be represented by a one-way flow chart. A holographic image is an appropriate metaphor for understanding the forms of relationships in the alternate position. A holographic reproduction is a three dimensional reproduction. Further, to alter or distort one part of the holographic image is to change the entire image. It is the interconnection of the parts of the relationship which distinguishes a holographic form of a relationship from a mechanical one.

An understanding of the differences between mechanical and holographic relationships is increased by looking at the sources of change and explanation, the next two characteristics to be presented. These two characteristics can only be understood by looking at them together. The traditional approach sees the sources of change as determined and potentially identifiable, while researchers using the alternate approach see the sources of change as indeterminate and therefore not identifiable. In like manner, researchers using the traditional approach explain their findings as linearly causal, that is, *A* causes *B*. The alternate position on causality is that it is mutual, that is, *A* and *B* cause each other. The cause is inseparable from the effect, and further, it is indistinguishable from it.

The difference between the two positions continues regarding the nature of change. The phenomenological position is called morphogenesis while the traditional position is called the mechanical model. Morphogenesis can be understood as the way a living organism develops from a single undifferentiated cell to a complex differentiated multicelled being. Morphogenesis differs from a mechanical model which is assembled one piece at a time. The two positions offer a clear difference regarding the nature of change. To change by morphogenesis is to change organically, with one subtle change affected by the next change in a connected and organic manner. To change mechanically is to change by replacing parts — individual and discrete parts. The observer's perspective is the last distinction between the two orientations. In the positivist approach to research the observer or the observer's instruments are objective or potentially objective. In the phenomenological position the observer is perspectival, that is, has a singular perspective.

The differences between the two paradigms are basic and affect both the general approach to research and particular practices within each research tradition. Michael Polanyi provides a clear statement of the purpose of the positivist position on research when he states: 'The avowed purpose of the positivist sciences is to establish complete intellectual control over experience in terms of precise rules. Further, we should only have to follow the rules faithfully to understand this world'

(Polanyi, 1958). The alternate approach, conversely, can be characterized by a close examination of people's words, actions, and documents in order to discern patterns of meaning which come out of this data.

As the above tables indicate, there is not one scientific method, but at least two scientific methods. However, students and others tend to think of one scientific method that includes such things as experimental and control groups, variables that are quantified, tests for reliability, and large random samples. This method (the traditional approach) is associated with the natural sciences, such as (physics and chemistry, and given high marks because of this association. The traditional scientific method is further equated with generating a hypothesis, testing it, and generalizing the findings to the larger population. In addition to the methodological association, subtler associations are also made with research and the scientific method: the white lab coat — a quintessential scientific badge, the complex and therefore important mathematical formula, and the tests for significance which are confused with indicators of importance. As the working assumptions embedded within the traditional approaches to science affect beginning researchers, it becomes all the more important that they have a solid grounding in the philosophic underpinnings of qualitative research.

These two paradigms are based on two different and competing ways of understanding the world. As we observe and understand, these competing ways of comprehending the world are reflected in the way research data is collected (words versus numbers) and the perspective of the researcher (perspectival versus objective). There are many sources of problems one encounters during the course of a research project. We will focus on three pervasive sources to illustrate the value of understanding the philosophical underpinnings of the research traditions: problems arising from a focus on words rather than numbers, problems relating to perspectival point of view versus objective point of view, and the difference between proof and discovery.

Three Research Issues

These three types of issues will be approached by developing a philosophic perspective, and will provide a preview of the manner in which a philosophic disposition will be integrated throughout the book. The problems to be discussed are specifically: (a) understanding similarities and differences between words and numbers in the two different approaches to research; b) a perspectival observer versus objective observer; and c) discovery versus proof. Each of these areas will be explored in turn and a research exercise will be provided.

Words and numbers

Qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and records. The traditional or quantitative approach to research looks past these words, actions and records to their mathematical significance. The traditional approach to research quantifies the results of these observations. Mathematics, or more specifically statistics, plays an important part in the shaping of this view of science. A major difference between the two approaches is not the counting or lack of counting of the occurrences of a particular word or behavior, but rather the meaning given to the words, behaviors or documents as interpreted through quantitative analysis or statistical analysis as apposed to patterns of meaning which emerge from the data and are often presented in the participants' own words.

The statistical view of science came to dominate the way we think about doing science about 75 years ago. The discipline of statistics has articulated these ideas over the course of many years but an understanding of the underlying philosophy of numbers as they relate to conducting research in both the natural and social sciences has been obscured by the gradual development of the discipline of statistics and, as a result, much of the context and therefore the meaning of statistics is no longer easily visible to researchers as they examine the nature of their paradigm. These methods which were first presented within the philosophy of mathematics have become systematized into a discipline of statistics. Polanyi (1958), while exploring the nature of objectivity in scientific investigation, cites two important works on the use of statistics: J.M. Keynes' *Treatise on Probability* published in 1921 and Sir Ronald Fisher's *treatise on the design of experiments* written in 1935.

Statistics now appears to be unconnected to its philosophical origins. It is important, however, to recall that there is a long tradition within the history of science concerning the understanding of numbers: what they mean, how to use them, when to use one particular approach and when another.

The philosophic writing in qualitative research provides the same type of orientation that statistics now provides for the experimental and/or quantitative researcher though these writings have not yet been organized into a subdiscipline like statistics. While the qualitative researcher will not have to confront statistics, the tasks of understanding and presenting qualitative research is as demanding as the task of understanding statistics.

To help you understand the methods of qualitative research we are first presenting some of the philosophical underpinnings and then

providing examples and activities to 'hook' you into the research while also grounding you in the philosophy of a qualitative approach to inquiry. Our hope in placing the philosophic underpinning of a qualitative approach to inquiry within a how-to-do-it research book is that beginning qualitative researchers will see the relatedness of the philosophy to the research which they are conducting and the examples presented here. It has been our experience that beginning researchers are helped by understanding the different ways words, actions and documents are used in the opposing research paradigms.

To understand the world under investigation, people's words and actions are used by qualitative researchers. The two chapters that follow will provide a beginning methodology for the use of people's words, actions and documents within a qualitative perspective. This short introduction will not provide answers to the problem of using and understanding peoples' words in qualitative research but will provide a prologue to what follows.

Why words? Simply stated, using the subjects' words better reflects the postulates of the qualitative paradigm. The qualitative researchers looks to understanding a situation as it is constructed by the participants. The qualitative researchers attempts to capture what people say and do, that is, the products of how people interpret the world. The task for the qualitative researcher is to capture this process of interpretation. To do this requires an empathic understanding or the ability to reproduce in one's own mind the feeling, motives, and thoughts behind the actions of others (Bogden and Taylor, 1975: 13-14). Words are the way that most people come to understand their situations. We create our world with words. We explain ourselves with words. We defend and hide ourselves with words. The task of the qualitative researcher is to find patterns within those words (and actions) and to present those patterns for others to inspect while at the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants originally experienced it. Bruner argues in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* that the examination of people's stories captures the particulars of people's lives and what they mean, while the positivist paradigm with its mathematical approach 'seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction, and in the end disclaims in principle any explanatory values at all where the particular is concerned' (1986: 13). In other words, from the qualitative perspective, to present this situation mathematically by using statistics would be to strip the experience of its meaning, that is, the meaning as the participants experienced it.

Further, to present the results of the research to the participants in a manner which they can understand is to include the participants in

the discovery. If the knower and the known are interdependent (Postulate II), then there must be integrity between how the researcher experiences the participants in the study, how the participants experience the situation and their participation in it, and how those results are presented.

Research exercise #1: Understanding the role of people's words and actions

The purpose of this exercise is to provide first-hand experience concerning the difference between a descriptive or narrative understanding of a situation and understanding the same situation statistically.

- 1 Write a diary entry about a classroom discussion you recently observed. Write a detailed description of a part of that discussion. When possible use quotes from the participants as best as you can remember them.
- 2 From your notes, count the number of times each student participated in the discussion. Make a column for student names, then another column for the number of responses by that student. Now, add the number of responses and average the total to get average responses per student.
- 3 Which of the two entries best fit the qualitative paradigm?

Note: The activities in the first section of the book will provide you with a sense of what qualitative research feels like, though they are *not* a model for conducting qualitative research.

Perspectival versus objective views

The importance of maintaining integrity of the subjects in the research results discussed earlier relates closely to the discussion of the perspectival versus the objective observer. Why advocate a perspectival view when an objective view is almost synonymous with good research in the minds of many persons? Why would someone want to conduct a research project which was not objective? Or, an even more serious criticism of qualitative research, why would someone attempt to make a case for a way of doing research which is not objective? Isn't a lack of objectivity synonymous with sloppy research? Look back at Postulates II and V before answering the above questions.

Word meanings can be slippery. Defining words is also a political activity. It is in part because of the political nature of word meaning that we use *perspectival* rather than *subjective*. Subjective and objective are considered opposites by many and, it would seem appropriate to compare these two words. However, the word subjective carries too much connotative baggage to help a beginning qualitative researcher understand more fully its application. The short examination of subjective and objective within the history of research provides some sense of our word choice.

The traditional position has had the advantage of defined *objective* and *subjective* as they relate to research. Therefore, objective has come to mean true, factual, and real. By default, subjective has come to mean partially-true, tentative, and less-than-real. However, one might take another look at the word objective and develop a different sense of the word. An object is a thing, an entity. An object is other; to be objective is to make something into other. To be objective is to be cold and distant. Within this framework, subjective also takes on a different meaning: to be subjective is to be aware of the agency, that is, of action. From the phenomenological point of view, subjective is synonymous with agency or with the actor's perspective. To be subjective, therefore, is to 'tend to' the subject. The speech patterns and behavior of actors or agents and the specific context in which these behaviors occur are what the qualitative researcher is trying to understand. The purpose of qualitative research is to get at the world of the agent or subject.

Further, qualitative researchers understand that they are also subjects or actors and not outside of the process as impartial observers. Subjective researchers are exposed to the same constraints in understanding the world as are the persons they are investigating. This point is exemplified in Postulate II; the world of the knower and what is to be known (the known) are one.

Understanding the way that the two practices (traditional and qualitative) use the words subjective and objective is a beginning point for the qualitative researcher. However, as the qualitative researcher knows very well, words carry meanings, even meanings that are not intended. Therefore, we have chosen to use the word *perspectival* instead of subjective to refer to the way qualitative researchers see the world. *Perspectival* has the added advantage of being inclusive of differing perspectives, including but not limited to the researchers' perspective. Without a good understanding of the different observer perspectives of the research approaches, the new qualitative researcher is likely to misunderstand the tasks of data collection and analysis which are central to all research paradigms.

Research exercise #2: Using your own experience to understand the paradigm shift

The purpose of Research Exercise #2 is to gain a better understanding of the different ways one might answer the questions raised in Postulates of the Research Paradigm (Table 2.1).

- 1 Look to your own experience to make a case for the qualitative orientation to research. Recall an incident from your past which would be viewed differently from another point of view. After you have articulated your story from your point

of view, rethink (rewrite) the story from the point of view of another person in the incident. Now think of what an objective view of the incident might be. Does the objective version of the story capture the story? Can there be a totally objective version of the story?

- 2 Now re-examine all the postulates. Your examination and reflection of the incident and the postulates should give you a better understanding of the philosophical underpinning of qualitative research.

Discovery versus proof

The goal of qualitative research is to discover patterns which emerge after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the research topic. What can be discovered by qualitative research are not sweeping generalizations but contextual findings. This process of discovery is basic to the philosophic underpinning of the qualitative approach. Again Michael Polanyi shapes our understanding of this process. Discovery is understood in the relationship between what Polanyi calls the subsidiary and the focal. Polanyi argues that no knowledge is, or can be, wholly focal or, as we might say totally in focus. When trying to discover something or to uncover a problem, the subsidiary looms large because we do not know in a focal sense what we are looking for, and yet we can look because we rely on clues to its nature. It is through these clues that we somehow anticipate what we have not yet plainly understood. Further, these clues are held in subsidiary rather than focal awareness (Grene, 1969). This searching for pattern to help understand a given person, situation or phenomena is an activity for qualitative research as it is based on Postulates I (reality is multiple and constructed), IV (events are simultaneously and mutually shaped) and VI (the goal of this approach is discovery).

Isn't it also possible to make a strong case for quantitative research as a method of discovery? The answer is not obvious but can be understood by examining the nature and role of the hypothesis in quantitative research. A hypothesis is a hunch or educated guess which is set up in a particular manner so as to prove or verify something. More accurately, a null hypothesis is established so that all other alternate explanations can be eliminated. But where does the hypothesis come from? The answer is that it comes from the observation of specific people and events. Further, the hypothesis is formed when these observations coalesce into a hunch. This hunch is then refined into a hypothesis. The observation and the discernment of patterns come before the hypothesis, not after it, that is, the discovery comes before the proof. And as Bruner argues, the mathematical approach 'seeks to transcend the particular by higher and higher reaching for abstraction,

and in the end disclaims in principle any explanatory values at all where the particular is concerned' (1986: 13).

Summary

Understanding the philosophic underpinnings of the two research traditions as exemplified in the postulates is, we believe, an essential beginning place for students of research. It is even more important for students who are beginning qualitative researchers since the assumptions of the qualitative traditions are not well known in the larger community. If philosophic assumptions are left unarticulated they become a stumbling block for solving research problems.

A working knowledge of the philosophic underpinnings of qualitative research is necessary even to identify a researchable problem. After a researchable problem has been identified, one has to figure out how to begin thinking through that problem. Metaphorically, unarticulated philosophical assumptions are like an unlighted room. Without the light of an articulated philosophical perspective, one is likely to stumble over objects and to misunderstand the nature of the rooms within which one is stumbling around. To extend this metaphor, turning on the light provides some help. However, research is always complex and difficult and turning on the lights (understanding the philosophical underpinnings) will provide only an opportunity to see what the problem is. To solve these research problems one needs to develop and use a set of tools. These tools are best used by persons who know what they are working on. This chapter, and to a considerable extent the next two chapters, are an effort to turn on the lights, that is, to articulate the philosophic underpinnings of qualitative research. Further, while the main purpose of the philosophic chapters is to provide a grounding in the underlying positions taken within the two research paradigms in order to guide research practices, this background should also be of assistance in defending qualitative research to colleagues as serious, rigorous and important.

Note

- 1 We use the word postulate to emphasize the arbitrary nature of the claim for truth. The term axiom implies worthiness and general acceptance of an idea that seems at odds with a postmodern world view.

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The Qualitative Posture: Indwelling

A posture can be defined as a state or condition taken by one person at a given time especially in relation to other persons or things. This is the meaning of the title of this chapter: A qualitative researcher assumes the posture of indwelling while engaging in qualitative research. This posture (indwelling) is very different from the posture of a quantitative researcher because each research orientation is based on different sets of postulates regarding the nature of the world and the implication of those postulates on the conducting of research.

To indwell means to exist as an interactive spirit, force or principle, and to exist *within* as an activating spirit, force or principle. It literally means to live between, and within. Perhaps this dictionary definition can be translated for qualitative research to mean being at one with the persons under investigation, walking a mile in the other person's shoes, or understanding the person's point of view from an empathic rather than a sympathetic position. Polanyi states in *Knowing and Being*:

To this extent knowing is an indwelling; that is a utilization of the framework for unfolding our understanding in accordance with the indications and standards imposed by the framework . . . If an act of knowing affects our choice between alternate frameworks, or modifies the framework in which we dwell, it involves a change in our way of being.

(Greene, 1969: 84)

This indwelling, as the quote indicates, is also reflective. To reflect is to pause and think; to process what has gone before. The qualitative researcher is a part of the investigation as a participant observer, an in-depth interviewer, or a leader of a focus group but also removes himself from the situation to rethink the meanings of the experience.

While information gathering and interpretation of information is the task of all research, one of the fundamental differences between traditional research and qualitative research concerns the methods and

tools for the collection and analysis of data. The traditional researcher attempts to be, and in fact claims to achieve, objectivity through the use of their information gathering tools such as standardized tests, and mathematical or statistical analysis. Working from a different world view (see Table 2.2), the qualitative researcher attempts to gain an understanding of a person or situation that is meaningful for those involved in the inquiry. To reach their goals, researchers in the traditional orientation look to reliable and valid non-human instruments of data collection and statistical analysis, while the qualitative inquirer looks to indwelling as a posture and to the *human-as-instrument* for the collection and analysis of data.

The human-as-instrument is a concept coined by Lincoln and Guba to illustrate the unique position taken by qualitative researchers and builds implicitly on Polanyi's concept of indwelling. A person, that is, a human-as-instrument, is the only instrument which is flexible enough to capture the complexity, subtlety, and constantly changing situation which is the human experience (1985). And it is human experiences and situations that are the subjects of qualitative research. Human-as-instrument simply means that it is the person with all of her or his skills, experience, background, and knowledge as well as biases which is the primary, if not the exclusive, source of all data collection and analysis. Lincoln and Guba argue that a human instrument is responsive, adaptable and holistic. Further, a human investigator has knowledge based experience, possesses an immediacy of the situation, and has the opportunity for clarification and summary on the spot. Finally, a human investigator can explore the atypical or idiosyncratic responses in ways that are not possible for any instrument which is constructed in advance of the beginning of the study (1985).

Traditionally oriented inquirers or quantitative researchers, on the other hand, assume the world can be broken into simpler parts and therefore observed by less complex, non-human instruments. Those who follow the tenants of the positivist position believe that a standardized instrument, a pre-designed study can capture the topic under investigation (including human behavior) because they view reality as quantifiable, as objective and as divisible into smaller and smaller parts without distorting the phenomena under investigation.

In a manner very similar to Lincoln and Guba, Michael Polanyi compares the complexity of people to simplicity of inanimate objects: 'Persons and problems are felt to be more profound, because we expect them yet to reveal themselves in unexpected ways in the future, while cobblestones evoke no such expectations' (Polanyi, 1967: 32). What people do in a given situation can never be fully predicted or

predetermined. Polanyi summarizes the complexity of observing the human phenomena as follows: '... as we proceed to survey the ascending stages of life, our subject matter will tend to include more and more of the very faculties on which we rely for understanding it. We realize then that what we observe about the capacities of living beings must be consonant with our reliance on the same capacities for observing it' (1958: 347). In other words, the subject matter is as complex as the observer. Human situations and human beings are too complex to be captured by a static one-dimensional instrument.

If one cannot capture humans and human situations with a single instrument or a single observation, what is a researcher to do? The answer, from the point of view of the phenomenological perspective, to the question of how one finds out about the complexities of problems and persons is indwelling; the research framework which we suggest is the posture taken by a qualitative researcher, by the human-as-instrument. A qualitative researcher learns about significant aspects of reality by indwelling in these complexities. These complexities, as Lincoln and Guba state, cannot be figured out, cannot be understood by one-dimensional, reductionist approaches; they demand the human-as-instrument; they demand indwelling. To restate, the human instrument is the only data collection instrument which is multifaceted enough and complex enough to capture the important elements of a human person or activity.

Human Plurality and Indwelling

Enter into the world. Observe and wonder; experience and reflect. To understand a world you must become part of that world while at the same time remaining separate, a part of and apart from. Go then, and return to tell me what you see and hear, what you learn, and what you come to understand.

(Patton, 1980: 121)¹

A human being can be an instrument of inquiry and thus explore idiosyncrasies and find patterns of behavior, in part, because of what Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958) calls human plurality. Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold characteristic of equality and distinction. If we were not equal we could not understand each other or those who came before us. If we were not distinct we would not need to understand each other. Our need to understand and be understood gives rise to inserting ourselves

into the world through speech and action. Arendt states that we create a 'web of meaning' and are also brought into already existing webs of meaning. These webs of meaning are the context in which we reveal ourselves to others. Equality allows for some access to the inner world of others because in some important ways we are all alike, while distinction makes it necessary for the other person to attempt to communicate through words and action what they experience internally because we are all different in other ways (Morehouse, 1991). This plurality establishes both the need for and the difficulty of communication, of understanding the speech and actions of others. Understanding communication is difficult even if the other person tells us how she feels about a situation. However, this telling does not provide direct knowledge of that person's world. The inquirer must translate the information and this translation is colored by the inner experiences and feeling of the inquirer (Schumacher, 1977).

Arendt sees action, that is, people speaking and acting in the public domain, as one of the defining characteristics of human nature². She further sees action as revealing human nature. Arendt states in *On the Human Condition*: 'This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them — that is, in sheer human togetherness' (1958: 180). *Sheer human togetherness* is another way of stating, another way of understanding the posture of indwelling. In fact, it is the ability to be with others that distinguishes the qualitative researcher. When a person indwells in a situation, he or she is with the person, i.e., the qualitative researcher experiencing the world in a similar way with the participant. Thus indwelling is not arbitrary but is based on a standard of what is tacitly known of the subject or situation of the indwelling. That standard is based on human plurality.

We can indwell in a human setting, in a human activity, or with a person because of human plurality, that is, the condition of being distinct from and equal to all other humans. The human-as-instrument is connected to the topic of investigation both intentionally and philosophically. In other words, as the second postulate of the alternate paradigm states the knower and the known are connected. Importantly, the qualitative researcher recognizes this connection and works with it rather than against it. Arendt's idea of human plurality helps instruct us on how we might work with that postulate. We work with the postulate by recognizing both our equality and our uniqueness. Our understanding of our equality with other persons allows us access to their world, to their experiences. Our awareness of our difference instructs us that we cannot assume that our understanding of the situation is the same

as the other person's understanding. We may be able to approximate that understanding by indwelling, but it is not given to us by human plurality, in fact, human plurality makes the approximation possible, but in no way guarantees it. Indwelling becomes the orientation, the posture that is essential to the qualitative researcher who is aware of human plurality and is using that awareness to develop their skill as a human instrument.

Since understanding of human experience is not a given, being with a person or in a situation becomes one of the ways that the human-as-instrument comes to understand the person or setting under investigation. If it is true, as Ortega taught, that we comprehend only what we see being born (Silver, 1978), then indwelling is the way qualitative researchers understand persons and situations, as indwelling allows the researcher to see things coming into existence. Indwelling requires the investment of sufficient time to learn the culture, test for misinformation introduced by distortion either of self or of respondents, and to build trust. Indwelling places the qualitative researcher in a situation long enough to understand things as they unfold. Indwelling allows the researcher to identify those elements or characteristics in the situation or person that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued. Further, indwelling is the posture required to focus on these persons or situations in detail. Indwelling allows the inquirer to see differences within similar situations and similarities in different situations. Indwelling is essential to qualitative research given the powers and restraints of human plurality.

Indwelling as Authentic Investigation

Go forth now. Go forth and question. Ask and listen. The world is just beginning to open up to you. Each person you question can take you into a new part of the world. For the person who is willing to ask and listen, the world will always be new. The skilled questioner and the attentive listener knows how to enter into another's experience.

(Patton, 1990: 278)³

How can a human instrument come to understand the world of others, their intentions, aims and purposes? What prevents the inquirer from misinterpretation of this world? Is this understanding of the world helpful to others? If so, in what ways? Again, the work of Michael Polanyi will provide a framework for building and improving the skills

of the human as instrument of inquiry and provide the basis on which the trustworthiness of the naturalistic inquiry can be built. Michael Polanyi, a Hungarian born chemist, turned social scientist and philosopher of science, was drawn initially to questions of how we come to know something new because of questions concerning the politics of science. His exploration of the political nature of science led him eventually to the development of a comprehensive epistemology. His epistemology provides an answer to the question of how one acquires new knowledge.

The question 'how does one gain new knowledge' was first raised in Plato's dialogue, *The Meno*. The riddle posed in *The Meno* is as follows: Socrates engages Meno in a conversation about the nature of virtue. After dismissing several of Meno's definitions of virtue, Socrates says that he does not know the definition of virtue either, but nonetheless invites Meno to try to find the definition of virtue. Meno responds:

Why, on what lines will you look, Socrates, for a thing of whose nature you know nothing at all? Pray, what sort of thing, amongst those that you do not know, will you treat us to as the object of your search? Or even supposing, at best, that you hit upon it, how will you know it is the thing you did not know?

(Cited in Grene, 1966: 23)

This is a question which Socrates never answers; however, Polanyi in several works, provides his answer to this question (1958; 1959; 1966; Grene, 1969). Polanyi begins his answer by looking at the nature of tacit knowledge, that is, knowledge that we have but cannot state. He sees the beginning of all knowledge in tacit knowledge. '(A)ll understanding is tacit knowing, all understanding is achieved by indwelling' (Polanyi cited in Grene, 1969: 160). He says, in particular, that problems are always found, and people understood in a tacit manner.

Tacit knowledge is distinct from articulated knowledge. Tacit knowledge is what we know but cannot say. Polanyi states that tacit inquiry is like feeling one's way around in a dark cave using a stick as a probe. The inquirer's hand never touches the cave directly, yet she or he eventually learns the cave. Polanyi argues that we become aware of what is at the other end of the stick by attending away from the direct feeling in our hand and toward the meaning of the feeling. That meaning is located at the tip of the stick. We attend to the far end of the stick, not the the feeling in our hand. Thus we interpret the effect by transposing meaningless feelings into meaningful ones. This is also how we use other tools (Morehouse, 1979).

This may appear to be a long way to go to understand tacit knowledge, but the stick or probe in a dark cave is a good metaphor for tacit knowledge. Just as we cannot see (or perhaps say aloud what the cave looks like), we nonetheless know the cave well enough to move around in it with the help of our probe. Qualitative inquiry begins with what we know but cannot say, it begins with tacit knowledge.

Tacit knowledge

Two types of knowledge play a part in the way we understand the world, tacit and explicit knowledge, but tacit knowledge is more basic — it comes before explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is unarticulated knowledge; it is unformulated, such as the type of knowledge we have in the act of doing something. Explicit knowledge is that which is or can be written down in words, maps, or mathematical formulas. The major logical difference between the two types of knowledge is that explicit knowledge can be subject to critical reflection, while tacit knowledge cannot be reflected on. What this means in practice is that as we begin a qualitative research project we will rely on our tacit knowledge as well as our explicit knowledge in order to understand the situation. Our explicit knowledge can be entered into our field notes, while our tacit knowledge will aid us in understanding the environment 'by the seat of our pants'. As we articulate our observations, reflect on what we know explicitly, we will begin to uncover our tacit knowledge. Once this tacit knowledge is made explicit, it too can be reflected on. As Michael Polanyi states, 'But articulation does not merely make us better informed: it enriches us more by increasing our mental power over the given piece of information' (1959: 24).

Tacit knowledge is gained by indwelling. When one lives within a situation one learns to pay attention to the subsidiary, that is, one learns to attend away from the object and toward the meaning of the object. This is what we do in reading, for example. In order to read this passage, you must focus away from the letters and even the words, toward the meaning of the passage. But how do we understand problems, the actions of persons, or the meaning of institutions or rituals? Polanyi's answer is by indwelling. 'Tacit knowing now appears as an act of indwelling by which we gain access to a new meaning. When exercising a skill we literally dwell in the innumerable muscular acts which contribute to its purpose, a purpose which constitutes their joint meaning' (Polanyi in Grene, 1969: 160).

What becomes known by indwelling is not just the pieces, but the

whole — what Polanyi calls *joint meaning*. It is 'not by looking at things, but by indwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning' (Polanyi, 1967: 18). By attending away from or perhaps through the pieces to the meaning of the pieces is the way we understand the whole. This is the paradox of tacit knowledge and of indwelling: The pieces of the puzzle are essential to knowing the whole, but in order to gain an understanding of the whole, we must experience, rather than attend to, these pieces, thus allowing the whole to emerge from the experience. Tacit knowledge dwells in our awareness of particulars while bearing on an entity which the particulars jointly constitute. In order to share this indwelling, the qualitative researcher must presume that the activity of the participants in the study which appears at the moment to be meaningless will, in fact, become meaningful as the researcher participates alongside these participants (Polanyi, 1967). Understanding occurs in this tacit manner: We can only understand problems, institutions and persons in this same indirect way. In effect, we understand the trees as they are a subsidiary part of the forest. Understanding of persons is gained to the extent to which we can dwell in the external workings of their minds from outside. According to Marjorie Grene, who edits a collection of Polanyi's writings entitled *Knowing and Being: Essays by Michael Polanyi*, we can do this fairly well since many tacit functions of our mind are accessible by attending to behavior (1969).

In understanding tacit and explicit knowledge, that is, in understanding the *modus operandi* of a naturalistic inquirer, it is helpful to know more about the relationship between the thing to be known and the knower. A person has access to knowledge because of a three-way relationship between the subsidiary, the focal and the knower, according to Michael Polanyi. A person sees the world which is mostly background or subsidiary. In order to bring an object into the foreground (focal), a person focuses attention. While focusing attention, the person remains a part of the world which he or she is observing. The knower controls what is ground and what is figural, what is subsidiary and what is focal, but cannot stand outside of the situation being observed. Marjorie Grene (1969) in summarizing Polanyi's ideas about the effects of subsidiary awareness on problem-solving, outlines his central thesis: no knowledge is, or can be *wholly* focal. Polanyi develops his argument by examining how problems are identified and solved. He sees problems as a special case that helps in understanding tacit and focal knowledge. For with problems, the subsidiary aspect looms even larger. One of the paradoxes of problem finding is that in a focal sense, we do not know what we are looking for when we are looking for a problem. How is

this possible? It is possible, paradoxically, because in looking for this problem, we rely on clues to its nature, clues which are in the background or subsidiary. These clues somehow allow us to anticipate what we have not yet plainly understood. These unnamed, perhaps unnameable clues we hold in subsidiary rather than focal awareness (Greene, 1969). Any type of trouble-shooting provides a commonplace example. If one has a problem with an automobile or a washing machine, one does not know the nature of the problem initially. One only knows that the machine does not work. However, many clues are available. By looking to one clue, examining its consequences, then looking to the next clue, one quickly or eventually arrives at the problem which is responsible for the malfunction.

To place Polanyi's central thesis into the activity of doing naturalistic inquiry, or qualitative research, what the searcher is looking for cannot be seen directly; it appears in the shadows. (The way qualitative researchers ask initial research questions is embedded in this orientation and will be explored in the next chapter.) The patterns which will explain the phenomena under investigation emerge from the data as shapes begin to form in the background. These patterns are formed within the context of the situation observed. In order to understand a person or a phenomenon, one needs to understand the context that surrounds the person or phenomenon. The naturalist inquirer does not know directly what he is looking for at the beginning of a research project because he does not know the context. One can further state that for the qualitative researcher, the person or the event can only be understood within the context or background. The person that emerges out of the context is not a universal person or event but rather a contextual person or event.

However, by immersing oneself in the situation, and by looking for general clues, shapes and forms, the naturalistic inquirer can anticipate what is yet not plainly understood. These clues are on the edges of the investigator's awareness. Through this process of looking at the background, patterns begin to take shape; in Polanyi's language, these things become focal. This focal knowledge can be further intensified through articulation. The ongoing descriptive reports (such as field notes) have their value in part because they are the means by which the inquirer makes the implicit (the subsidiary) explicit (articulate). Articulated information increases our ability to understand what we observe and also aids our ability to use our tacit knowledge. Polanyi sees all knowing based in tacit understanding. We know more than we can say, and the more we can say, the more our unarticulated or tacit knowledge grows.

Research exercise #3: Understanding tacit and explicit knowledge

This research exercise is intended to help you understand how you use tacit knowledge in your everyday effort at understanding the world around you. Further, you will better understand the role of making tacit knowledge explicit in extending your understanding. You will need pencil and paper for this activity.

- 1 Pick a sports activity or any other physical activity that you do with some regularity. Do that activity. Can you explain how you did it?
- 2 Now observe someone else doing that same activity. Write down what you observe in as straightforward a manner as possible. Now reflect on your doing of this activity. Do you have a more complete sense of the complexity of that activity? If you do, you have moved your understanding of that activity from tacit to explicit.

Tolerance for ambiguity

Achieving understanding (the goal of qualitative inquiry) is not an easy task; it depends in part on the personal quality of tolerance for ambiguity. In many ways, the task of the traditional researcher is easier. The traditionalist sets out to narrow the subject of inquiry before the investigation begins. He or she posits one or more hypotheses which focus the inquiry and which tell the researcher what to exclude from the study. The task of the qualitative inquirer is more ambiguous. Maurice Merleau-Ponty discusses this process in an essay entitled 'Cézanne's Doubt'. He outlines the difficulty of the qualitative researcher using the painter Paul Cézanne as a prototypic phenomenologist, or as we would say, a qualitative inquirer:

His painting was paradoxical: he was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following contours, with no outline to enclose the colors, with no perspectival or pictorial arrangement.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 12)

It is particularly the sensuous surfaces that the qualitative inquirer explores. He or she does so by following the contours of the investigations as they emerge, that is, not as a pre-set research script to follow in detail. The task of the naturalistic inquirer is to capture what people say and do as indicators of how people interpret their world (Bogden and Taylor, 1975). The perspective of the qualitative researcher is, therefore, open-ended and not clearly focused in its initial stages. The pictorial arrangement (that is, the key pieces of information in the study) change their meaning as new information comes into play and new perspectives are discovered.

To understand the data as it unfolds, that is, to find patterns within the data, a naturalistic researcher must have patience and accept tentative patterns and must possess a willingness to give up or to reconstruct these tentative patterns. To refer back to the quote about Cézanne's approach to painting, the naturalistic inquirer must continue to be guided by the sensuous surface, must move toward letting the painting establish its own contours, while constantly looking for the patterns as they emerge from the study. It is an extremely difficult task to 'let the data speak for itself'. It requires a tolerance for ambiguity.

A short definitional aside may be in order here. Ambiguity and vagueness are terms often used interchangeably; however, these words have different meanings which might aid in understanding a tolerance for ambiguity. An ambiguous situation is one which can be understood in more than one way. A vague situation, on the other hand, is one which lacks precision. While a qualitative researcher will need tolerance for both vagueness and ambiguity, these tolerances are of a slightly different sort. One can resolve a vague understanding by getting more exact information. For example, if the temperature is cool, one can find the exact degrees centigrade and the word cool will no longer be vague. However, if I say, 'it's cool', the listener needs to know what I am referring to, that is, the temperature outside, or a person. Knowing the degrees centigrade, that is, making things more specific, may not be helpful as *cool* may mean several different things in a given situation. A qualitative researcher's need to find more precise information (and tolerance is required in that process as the information may become more precise within the situation under observation) to resolve a vague situation. Perhaps, a more important quality in a qualitative researcher is tolerance for ambiguity; the ability to hold two or more different interpretations of an event, activity or person in mind, while waiting to see which interpretation is merited by the data which you are in the process of collecting.

Often, the inner world of others is initially seen as ambiguous. One of the ways these inner worlds can be made less ambiguous, or, to put it more positively, can be comprehended in all their ambiguity, is through stories. These stories unfold over time and the meaning of one event is understood in terms of both what came before it as well as what comes after it. Arendt's words, 'webs of meaning', gets at this complex interweaving of events. Arendt states that we insert ourselves into the world, into these webs of meaning which we call stories. Stories reveal an agent, that is, they reveal a person as an actor. Arendt, in a further exploration of speech and action, states that the speaker reveals himself only to the other in 'a backward glance'. This means that the listener

may understand the story of the teller or actor more fully than does the person telling or creating the story (Arendt, 1958).

Research exercise #4: Working with ambiguity

This research exercise is intended to help understand the ambiguous nature of an unfolding experience by using a short story as your field experience. Camus' (1957) 'Artist at work' is a workable example.

- 1 Read the first 15 pages or so and make some notes as to the salient features of the lead characters, the setting, and the direction of the story line. Put these notes aside as you read the next 10 or 15 pages.
- 2 Again, write some notes on the salient aspect of these 15 or so pages. Now go back and read your initial notes. Compare your notes on the first 15 pages. Are there some ambiguities? In other words, are some of your observations about the initial characteristics of the setting, the story line or the lead actors different from your reading of the first 15 pages? If they are you have experienced ambiguity. These conflicting perspectives or understandings cannot be resolved without further reading. To keep these conflicting understandings in mind — in the air, so to speak — is to tolerate ambiguity.
- 3 Continue reading the rest of the story in the same manner. At the end of the story, while an undisputed interpretation may not emerge, you will be able to resolve many of the ambiguous interpretations regarding character, story line and setting.
- 4 An alternate way to gain some sense of the importance of a tolerance for ambiguity is to reconstruct your understanding of a short story or novel which you enjoyed but struggled to understand. Reconstruct your struggle in roughly the same steps outlined above.

It is this backward glance that provides the beginning place for understanding the world of appearances and intentions. And it is understanding of people as agents or actors that the naturalistic inquirer is seeking. Van Wright defines understanding, as opposed to other forms of knowing, as connected to the aims and purposes of agents; it is connected to intentions (1971). Bogdan and Taylor in their book, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods*, extend this point by stating, 'The qualitative researcher views human behavior — what people say and do — as products of how people interpret their world' (1975: 13). They go on to say the the qualitative inquirer seeks to capture the process of interpretation (p. 14).

Meno's question

How has the following examination of tacit knowledge and tolerance for ambiguity addressed Meno's question? To place Meno's question within the context of qualitative research: Can the qualitative researcher capture the process of interpretation? Can the qualitative researcher understand agents and their intentions? The answer, stated as directly

as possible, is this: By understanding the connection between tacit knowledge and human plurality (equality and distinctiveness allow tacit access to individuals and human situations) and by maintaining a tolerance for ambiguity (avoiding premature closure on the subject under investigation), the researcher comes to understand the phenomena as patterns emerge. These patterns are recognized as valid as they are consonant with our own experiences, and yet we recognize the unique qualities of the persons or situations under investigation. We can feel confident, though not certain, if we have dwelled within the situation and observed closely what emerges from it. Again, to paraphrase Arendt: if we were not equal we could not possibly understand others, if we were not distinct, we would not need communication beyond points and grunts. The qualitative researchers develop their human skills of observing, questioning and probing to gain a more accurate picture of the world of others.

Narrativity

Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) in his note fragments collected under the title 'Toward a methodology for the human sciences' goes to the heart of qualitative research, that is, the connection between the knower and the known. To state Bakhtin's point: If a person (or subject as he says) is to be understood as a person and not as a thing, then the relationship between the researcher and the other person must be a dynamic and mutual relationship, what he calls a dialogue. He sees the researcher and the subject of the research connected as in a dialogue or interchange with one affecting the other. Postulate II of the qualitative paradigm (See Table 2.1) states: The knower and the known are interdependent. The knower cannot stand outside of what is to be known. Bakhtin's understanding of human subjectivity as it applies to qualitative research points to the connectedness and the interaction between knower and known within a narrative.

A narrative, according to Jerome Bruner in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986) and *Acts of Meaning* (1990) deals with the vicissitudes or changing nature of intentions. Intentions include beliefs, desires and commitment. Intentions are central to understanding an agent or an actor, that is, understanding a participant in a qualitative study. Qualitative research examines persons as agents. Bruner defines an agent as one who acts on intentional states such as beliefs, desires and commitments, states which are in fluctuation (1990).

As meaning is central to qualitative research, our use of the word needs some explanation. Meaning is what we can agree upon or at

least accept as a working basis for seeking agreement about a concept at hand. We achieve meaning through shared encounters. Bruner argues in *Acts of Meaning* that meaning-making is embedded within narrative or stories (1990). Our stories are lived experiences to which we, in concert with others, give meaning to those experiences. The qualitative researcher can examine the meanings of these stories because they are public and shared. Meaning, contrary to the beliefs of the traditional paradigm (as epitomized by the behaviorist in psychology) is neither hidden nor private. These meanings may be complex and multidimensional, but they are public and shared otherwise we would not be able to understand one another. These constructed meanings are possible because of what Hannah Arendt calls human plurality, that is, we are both distinct (that is, unique) and equal (Arendt, 1958). Given the qualitative researcher's immersion in culture, qualitative research must be organized around those meaning-making activities that connect a person to a culture.

Summary

As a way of summarizing as well as providing an additional tool for looking at the role of the human-as-instrument, it might be helpful to think about qualitative research as the 'reading' of a situation. Robert Scholes develops an approach to understanding or interpretation of a text, persons and events in his *Protocols of Reading*, which while focusing on the process of reading and writing, is very similar to the ideas discussed above. Scholes first explores the idea that reading a text or a situation might be understood metaphorically as a process of looking both forward and backwards (1989). The process of naturalistic inquiry looks back to events to be observed in order to clearly describe the events as they were unfolding and looks forward to the meaning which these events might have in the lived experience of the participants. Scholes then goes on to explore and reject this metaphor as well as another metaphor for understanding reading a text, or interpreting a situation, that of centripetal and centrifugal force, or a closing and opening of a circle. The issue here is what pulls things together and what pulls things apart or what should be included within the circle, and what should be placed outside it. This metaphor is rejected as helpful but not accurate enough to uncover the meaning of a text, or a person, or an event. As each metaphor is explored and abandoned in turn, Scholes uses the idea of the construction and abandonment of metaphors itself as a method for understanding the creative process of reading a situation. Scholes says that reading may best be thought of as

forming and rejecting metaphors. All interpretation of human situations (extending Scholes, ideas on reading) is dialectical, and accepting and rejecting metaphor are a part of that dialogue (Scholes, 1989).

In naturalistic inquiry, the searcher must go back and forth between the observed situation and its meaning, as experienced by the participants and as grasped metaphorically. Meaning is not given in the situation, but emerges from the situation built on both observation and the researcher. To accomplish the task of interpretation or reading, therefore, requires both creative and critical skills. This process requires us to get as close to the thing to be understood as possible, to indwell in the thing, and to reflect on it critically and creatively.

The ideas of Scholes concerning reader situations can be seen as applications of Polanyi's ideas of the central role of tacit knowledge. Scholes is presenting a literary way of indwelling. 'It brings home to us that it is not by looking at things, but by indwelling in them, that we understand their joint meaning' (Polanyi, 1967: 18). This statement by Polanyi about indwelling might well have been made by Scholes about reading and writing. Scholes argues that reading and writing are two ends of the same process. This is similar to the way Polanyi writes about the creative and critical elements of indwelling.

Polanyi, like Scholes, believes that meaning, whether in the world or in a text, is not singular, rather meaning derives from relationships. Meaning is both joint (that is, arises from relationships) and multiple (that is, it is understood from discrete points of view within relationships). The human-as-instrument is the most appropriate way to access these meanings since the human instrument, unlike objective instruments within the positivist paradigm, which can only capture the joint and multiple meanings of human experiences.

In summary, the method of qualitative inquiry using the human-as-instrument is possible within a posture of indwelling. It is descriptive, and its objective is to identify or define a situation. Qualitative research requires mediative or reflective thinking rather than calculative thinking. It is based on a posture toward knowledge which is inclusive and indwelling, rather than exclusive and distancing. The human-as-instrument, like all ways of knowing according to Polanyi, builds on tacit knowledge. The posture of the qualitative researcher is indwelling.

Notes

- 1 This quote is attributed to *Halcolm's Epistemological Parables*. Halcolm is a character invented by Michael Patton to provide words of wisdom to beginning qualitative researchers.

- 2 The other two conditions of human life are labor, that is, what we do to get food and shelter, and work, that is, what we do to create things that live after we die.
- 3 This quote Patton attributes to *Halcolm's Epistemological Parables*.

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Part II

From Ideas to Outcomes: Conducting Qualitative Research

Designing Qualitative Research: An Overview

The questions we ask will always to some degree determine the answers we find. This point is important in designing a qualitative study. The research questions that guide a qualitative study reflect the researcher's goal of discovering what is important to know about some topic of interest. A qualitative study has a focus but that focus is initially broad and open-ended, allowing for important meanings to be discovered.

The philosophical underpinnings of a qualitative research approach direct us to several key features that characterize this kind of research. The first three chapters were intended to place research practice within a theoretical framework. This chapter begins a hands-on application of qualitative research methodology which leads directly from the earlier presented theoretical framework. We assume that readers are seriously interested in learning about qualitative methodology so that they can critically read the qualitative research literature and conduct their own research investigations. Throughout the following chapters we continue our use of research exercises aimed at helping readers hone their skills as qualitative researchers. While it is conceivable that someone might read this book 'armchair fashion', it will be more instructive if readers actively engage in the research exercises or use the book to guide them through an actual research project.

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Whether one is examining the literature for qualitative studies or beginning the outlines of one's own study, these eight characteristics of qualitative research are important to consider:

1 An exploratory and descriptive focus

Research studies that are qualitative are designed to discover what can be learned about some phenomenon of interest, particularly social

phenomena where people are the participants (or as traditionally referred to — *subjects*). Qualitative researchers develop a general 'focus of inquiry' that helps to guide the discovery of what is to be known about some social phenomenon (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Researchers are interested in investigating and responding to exploratory and descriptive questions such as 'What is young children's conception of "mind"?' 'In what ways do people in this rural town build informal social networks?' 'How do people who work in this place think the physical environment could be improved?' The outcome of any of these studies is not the generalization of results, but a deeper understanding of experience from the perspectives of the participants selected for study. Mary Belenky and her associates have chosen the term *interpretive-descriptive research* to refer to exploratory studies which rely on people's words and meanings as the data for analysis (Belenky, 1992). Their work on exploring women's epistemology exemplifies the rich possibilities of research investigations that are conducted from a discovery mode (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986).

2 Emergent design

For students and researchers well schooled in traditional approaches to research design, the idea of a design evolving over time is contrary, and perhaps even blasphemous. Any student or researcher can, however, appreciate the experience of carrying out one's research study and discovering a feature for which one's research design did not allow consideration. It is this very notion of pursuing important or salient early discoveries that undergirds qualitative approaches to inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Stake, 1975). Important leads are identified in the early phases of data analysis and pursued by asking new questions, observing new situations or previous situations with a slightly different lens, or examining previously unimportant documents. This broadening or narrowing of what is important to study (i.e., the focus of inquiry) and the consequent sampling of new people and settings is anticipated and planned for, as best one can, in qualitative research designs. It is possible, however, to employ a nonemergent research design, where researcher's focus of inquiry is pursued using qualitative methods of data collection and data analysis, but the data is collected, *then* analyzed. This latter form of qualitative research, while less open and responsive, has yielded important findings (see, for example, Hodgson, 1984; Melman, 1987; Saljo, 1984).

3 A purposive sample

In qualitative research, participants (or settings, such as schools or organizations) are carefully selected for inclusion, based on the possibility that each participant (or setting) will expand the variability of the sample. Purposive sampling increases the likelihood that variability common in any social phenomenon will be represented in the data, in contrast to random sampling which tries to achieve variation through the use of random selection and large sample size. For example, if we were interested in understanding how people in rural areas develop social support networks, we would probably want to include people who had social networks made up of mostly family *and* people who had networks made up of mostly friends, since the process of building social networks is likely to be different for these individuals (Maykut and Garber, 1981). As our study of rural social networks proceeded, it would become more clear who would need to be included on purpose to fully understand the development of social support networks. Thus, in an emergent research design the composition of the sample itself evolves over the course of the study.

4 Data collection in the natural setting

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding people's experience in context. The natural setting is the place where the researcher is most likely to discover, or uncover, what is to be known about the phenomenon of interest. This characteristic of qualitative research again reflects the philosophic underpinnings of the alternate paradigm (see Table 2.1). Personal meaning is tied to context. For example, to understand more about college students' experience of academic life, the researcher goes to the classrooms, the library, the dorms or apartments, the student union, etc. to observe, to interview, to indwell. Chang (1992) provides a useful example of data collection in the natural setting, in his recent study of life in a US high school. Similarly, to explore how parents go about informally teaching their children, one goes to the places where this might happen, such as family homes, shopping centers, the YMCA, social events, etc. Extended amounts of time with people in the places they inhabit is a critical feature of indwelling, fostering the development of both explicit and tacit knowledge.

5 Emphasis on 'human-as-instrument'

We draw attention again to the key role of the researcher or the research team in the qualitative research process. While researchers are certainly pivotal in more traditional research approaches, the qualitative researcher has the added responsibility of being both the collector of relevant data — data whose relevance changes as the study proceeds — and the culler of meaning from that data, which most often is in the form of people's words and actions. It is possible to include other formal instruments, such as questionnaires or tests, in a qualitative study. In keeping with the alternative paradigm, however, instrumentation should be grounded in the data, inductively drawn from what is becoming salient to the researcher from the data she or he has already collected.

6 Qualitative methods of data collection

The data of qualitative inquiry is most often people's words and actions, and thus requires methods that allow the researcher to capture language and behavior. The most useful ways of gathering these forms of data are participant observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews, and the collection of relevant documents. Observation and interview data is collected by the researcher in the form of field notes and audio-taped interviews, which are later transcribed for use in data analysis. There is also some qualitative research being done with photographs and video-taped observations as primary sources of data (see, for example, Erickson and Wilson, 1982; Wagner, 1979).

7 Early and ongoing inductive data analysis

The characteristics of qualitative research described so far point to two important characteristics of qualitative data analysis: (a) it is an ongoing research activity, in contrast to an end stage, when the design is emergent; (b) it is primarily inductive. Analysis begins when one has accumulated a subset of the data, providing an opportunity for the salient aspects of the phenomenon under study to begin to emerge. These initial leads are followed by pursuing the relevant persons, settings, or documents that will help illuminate the phenomenon of interest. In other words, there is a broadening or narrowing of the focus of inquiry as the data suggest it. *What is important is not predetermined by the researcher.* Within the broad boundaries of the researcher's focus of

inquiry, the data are studied for what is meaningful to the participants in the study, or what Bogdan and Biklen (1982) refer to as 'participant perspectives'. The outcomes of the research study evolve from the systematic building of homogeneous categories of meaning inductively derived from the data.

8 A case study approach to reporting research outcomes

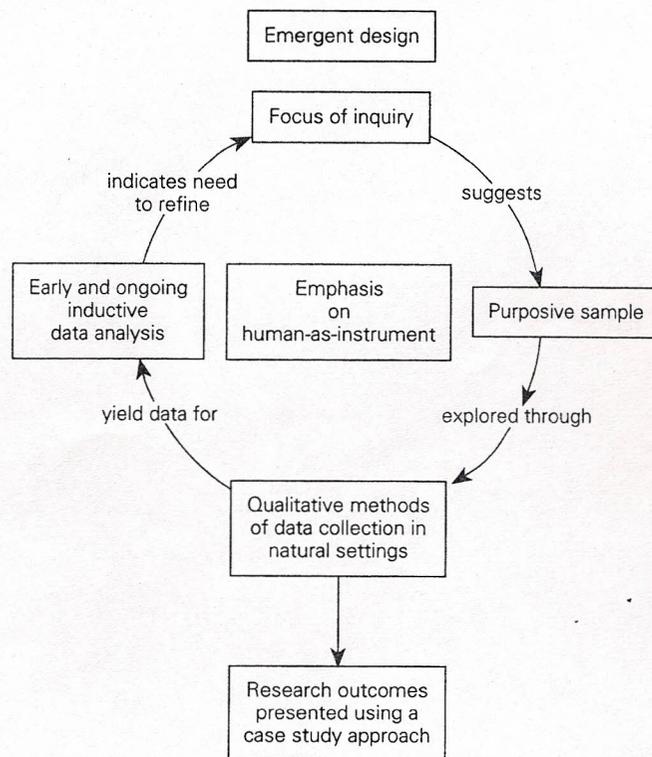
The results of a qualitative research study are most effectively presented within a rich narrative, sometimes referred to as a case study.¹ The number of cases varies with each study, from one case to several. With book length reports, the researcher has an opportunity to provide many excerpts from the actual data that let the participants speak for themselves — in word or action — thereby giving the reader sufficient information for understanding the research outcomes. In article length reports, the researcher by necessity is more brief, using a modified case-study mode of reporting. A qualitative research report characterized by rich description should provide the reader with enough information to determine whether the findings of the study possibly apply to other people or settings.

Taken together, these eight features of qualitative research reflect the alternate paradigm and reinforce the connection between this paradigm and the doing of research. In addition, these eight features provide a framework for designing and implementing a qualitative research study (see Figure 4.1). In the following chapters, we will explore each of these eight features in further detail, inviting you to engage in a series of research exercises to develop and refine your qualitative research skills.

Note

- 1 We are aware that the term *case study* may connote distance between the researcher and the people or settings that are the focus of the study, such as when an individual is described as a *case*. We use the term to emphasize the detailed narrative that characterizes a case-study report.

Figure 4.1: Characteristics of qualitative research



Liberally adapted from Lincoln and Guba (1985).

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Chapter 5

Generating Ideas

After Lincoln and Guba (1985), we have adopted the term *focus of inquiry* to describe the initial topic that a qualitative researcher pursues. How do you generate a focus of inquiry? If you are a researcher with a topic at hand this is not a difficult task, although the fit between the qualitative research paradigm and the research question can present problems which we will discuss later. As a student in search of a research topic, developing a focus of inquiry can be quite challenging. In our work with beginning student researchers we have used the following exercise, which involves both brainstorming and concept-mapping, in order to help them arrive at a focus of inquiry.

Research exercise #5: Developing a focus of inquiry

In order to do this exercise you will need a plain blank surface to write on, such as a large sheet of typing paper. It is useful to have a few different colored markers handy for recording ideas and indicating emphasis. We have found it useful to tape large pieces of easel paper on the wall to stand at and write on for the exercise.

- 1 Think quietly for a few minutes about some things that interest you and that you would like to know more about. What are some things that you would like to gather more information on in order to reach a clearer understanding? Jot down these topics in a corner of your paper.
- 2 Select one of the topics for this exercise, perhaps the one that interests you the most. Write that topic in the center of your paper and circle it. Use the same colored marker for this and the rest of the initial brainstorming.
- 3 For the next 5 minutes, write down the topics and ideas that relate to the topic in the center, drawing lines from the center to each new idea, and connecting or clustering similar ideas. Do not censor yourself. Write down all the things that come to mind that relate to this topic, including questions, concerns, words and even graphic images that might come to mind that you can quickly record. Stop writing after 5 minutes.
- 4 Step back and reflect on your concept map. Notice what kinds of things are on your mind. Do you see any patterns to your thinking? For example, do you notice that you keep coming back to a certain phenomenon or problem, age group, gender, type of person, type of organization, etc.? Or are your ideas quite varied? Take another colored marker and connect related ideas, if you see any connections.
- 5 Take yet another colored marker and circle the idea that is the most intriguing to you at this time. Use this idea as the basis for your work in the following sections.

We have used this exercise ourselves and with our students in an effort to tap into our own and their creativity, as well as to converge on a topic of interest. A few of the concept maps created by students are shown in Figure 5.1.

Once a topic of interest has been identified, the next step is to develop a researchable question based on the topic, one that reflects the goals of exploration and description. Our experience indicates that this aspect of research development, while appearing simple, is fraught with difficulty for the majority of us who have been weaned on the traditional scientific method. The most frequent types of researchable questions that are initially offered by beginning researchers are often those that involve quantification and the search for causal linkages, such as:

- 'What are the effects of television viewing on children's prosocial behavior?'
- 'Which therapy approach is more beneficial in the treatment of depression, behavior therapy or insight-based psychotherapy?'
- 'What is the relationship between expanding gender roles and self-esteem among women?'
- 'Do children from single-parent families experience more school failure than children from two-parent families?'

Figure 5.1: Concept maps created by student researchers

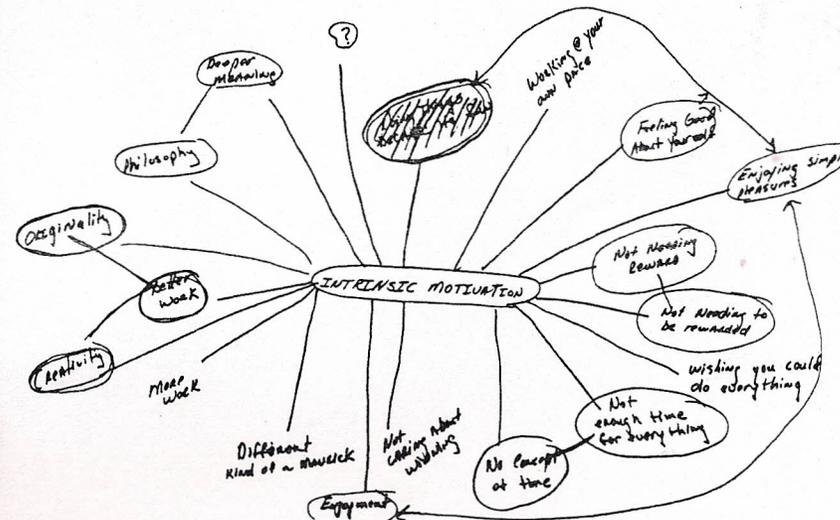
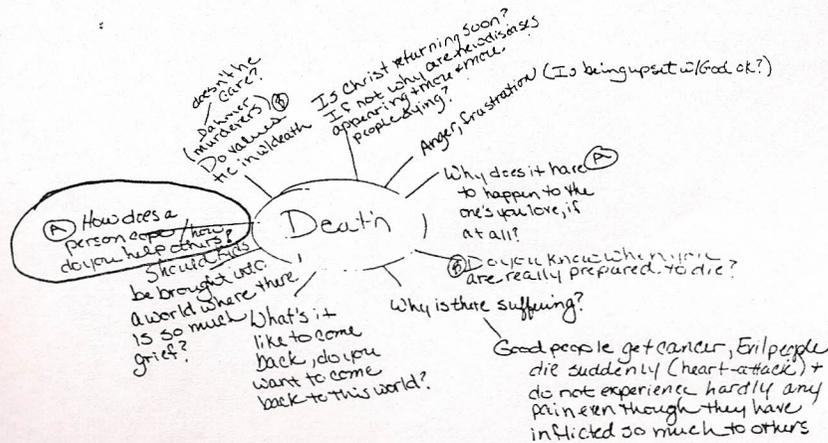
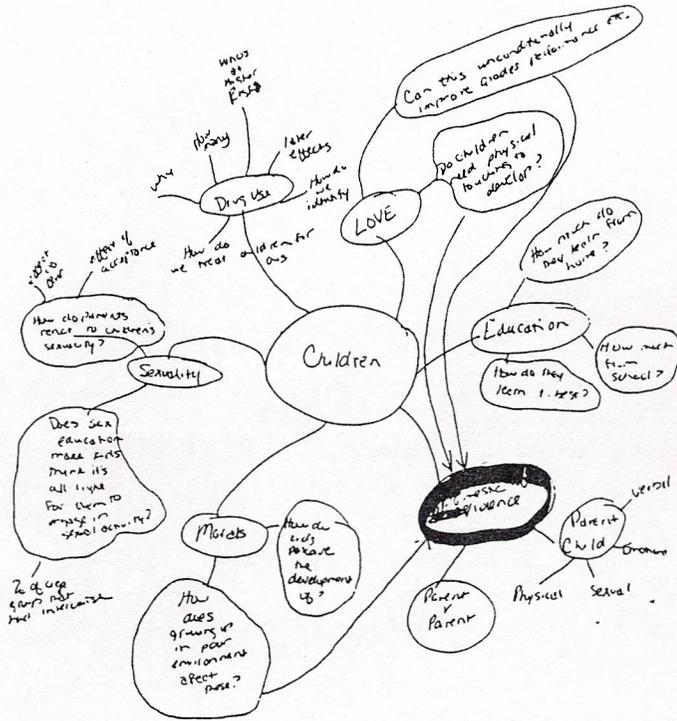


Figure 5.1: (Continued)



Note: Examples of student work appear throughout the book. This work is at times not completely legible, but we think these examples serve an important illustrative purpose.

These research questions would provide a useful first step to the development of hypotheses, which are the core of the traditional scientific method. They provide the basis for carrying out a study that will confirm or disconfirm a hypothesis and allow for future prediction. We are interested, however, in adopting a qualitative posture that is one of discovery and description, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of personal and social phenomena. We believe that the difficulty in posing a qualitative research question on any topic is a function of the embeddedness of the traditional paradigm in our culture.

To Lincoln and Guba (1985) this dilemma is a matter of *paradigm fit* in the development of a focus of inquiry. In our experience there is frequently a mismatch between the types of researchable questions students initially ask and the alternative paradigm, even after careful study of the postulates (see Table 2.1). The postulates undergirding the alternative paradigm draw our attention to the phenomenology of human experience; reality is variously constructed by each of us, and we bring our multiple meanings to each act and interaction. As a result, most human phenomena are the result of multiple causes, which often escape inquiry by traditional scientific methods. Thus, while we have all probably generated qualitative research questions, questions that focus on what can be explored and what can be described, these questions have not usually been identified as or considered real research.

Developing a qualitative research question or statement frequently acts as a key to the paradigm shift necessary to conduct qualitative research. This is at times an 'aha' experience for individuals beginning qualitative research, although from the outside it seems quite simple. Once researchers select a focus of inquiry, we have found that by using the sentence stems 'I would like to know about...' or 'I would like to understand more about...' they can reformulate their topics into a research statement that is a match with the qualitative paradigm. The research questions provided above can be reformulated in the following way:

- 'I would like to know whether and how children take prosocial messages from television programs and make them their own.'
- 'I would like to understand clients' experience of insight-based psychotherapy.'
- 'I would like to know more about women's experience of expanding gender roles and how they evaluate themselves: Are women experiencing broader, less stereotypical social roles? Are women with expanding gender roles experiencing high levels of self-esteem, evaluating themselves positively?'

'I would like to know more about what it is like growing up in a single-parent household.'

Here are some additional examples:

'I would like to know more about college students' experience of learning from lectures.'

'I would like to understand more about interpersonal attraction among young adult men and women.'

'I would like to understand more about the perceived reasons for the high turnover of nurses in large hospitals.'

'I would like to know more about children's perception and use of color.'

'I would like to know more about how schools identify students as handicapped when students have no detectable physical or neurological impairments.'

Each of these statements reflects a beginning focus of inquiry that is exploratory and descriptive. In addition, each focus of inquiry provides the initial boundaries of the study, broadly indicating what types of information to include in data collection and what types of people or settings to seek for inclusion (or exclusion) in the study. We liken this to throwing out a wide net, so as to be more assured of gathering up the important aspects of the phenomenon under study about which we initially know little. Once the study is underway and initial data is analyzed, the net will narrow or perhaps expand or even be drawn to a new spot! Thus it is likely that your focus of inquiry will change — narrowing, expanding, or being redirected — as the salient aspects of the phenomenon under study become more clear. This is an important step in a qualitative research study: finding out what you need to find out more about (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Refer back to your concept map and the idea that most interested you. Develop a qualitative research question or statement using the sentence stem 'I would like to know more about . . .' or 'I would like to understand more about . . .' This is your initial focus of inquiry.

At this point in the development of a qualitative research study, a review of the relevant literature is in order, particularly if you are interested in working with an existing theory or body of work. Going to the research literature after developing a focus of inquiry may seem a bit out of sequence for individuals who have designed research studies using the traditional model of research, where one's hypothesis evolves out of studying the research related to one's topic. We have found, however, that for beginning qualitative researchers, a fresh approach to a topic of interest helps maintain an attitude of discovery and a broader

focus of inquiry allowing for later narrowing or broadening of the focus as the data suggest it.

When searching the research literature on a topic, it is particularly useful if you can find relevant research that is qualitative, as evidenced by the eight features of qualitative research presented earlier. Quantitative studies can help inform you about your topic, but reliance on these studies presents the paradigm-fit problem: you are relying on research based on the postulates of a different paradigm. Developing a qualitative research study based on a theory or body of research that has resulted from a traditional approach to inquiry may yield quite incongruous findings.

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