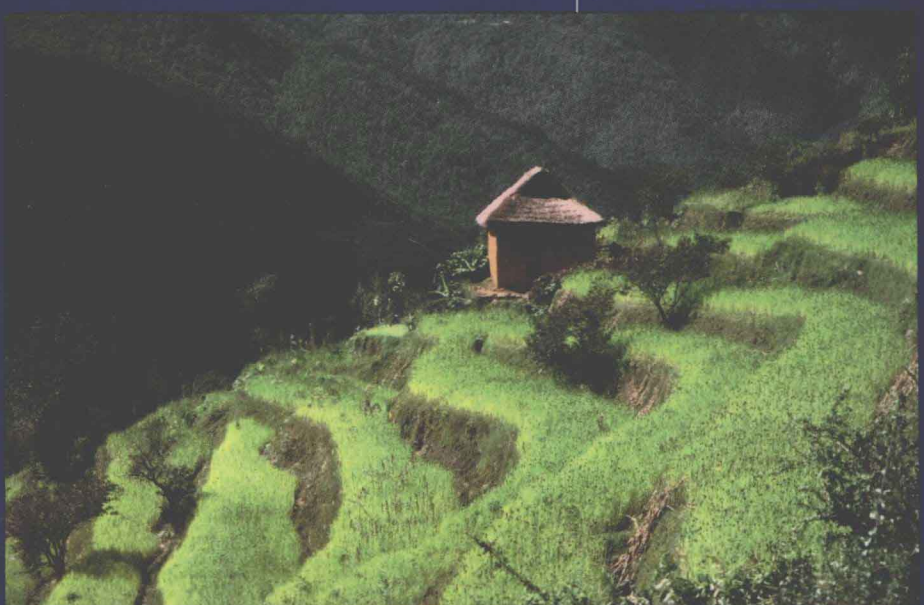
Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry



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Preface

◆ For more than two decades, a quiet methodological revolution has been taking place in the social sciences. A blurring of disciplinary boundaries has occurred. The social sciences and humanities have drawn closer together in a mutual focus on an interpretive, qualitative approach to research and theory. Although these trends are not new, the extent to which the "qualitative revolution" has overtaken the social sciences and related professional fields has been nothing short of amazing.

Reflecting this revolution, a host of textbooks, journals, research monographs, and readers have been published in recent years. In 1994, we published the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* in an attempt to represent the field in its entirety, to take stock of how far it had come and how far it might yet go. Although it became abundantly clear that the "field" of qualitative research is defined primarily by tensions, contradictions, and hesitations—and that they exist in a less-than-unified arena—we believed that the handbook could be valuable for solidifying, interpreting, and organizing the field in spite of the essential differences that characterize it.

Putting together the *Handbook* was a massive undertaking that was carried out over several years, the full story of which can be found in the preface to the *Handbook* (which can also be found on the Web site for the *Handbook*: http://www.sagepub.com/sagepage/denzin_lincoln.htm).

We have been enormously gratified and heartened by the response to the *Handbook* since its publication. Especially gratifying has been that it has been used and adapted by such a wide variety of scholars and graduate

students in precisely the way we had hoped: as a starting point, a springboard for new thought and new work.

◆ The Paperback Project

There was one constituency we did not focus on centrally as we developed the plan for the *Handbook*: students in the classroom. The sheer size of the *Handbook,* with its corresponding expense, seemed to make the book a difficult one to assign in courses. Yet within a year of publication, it became clear that the material contained in the *Handbook* was deemed sufficiently valuable to override some considerations of size and expense.

Despite the reception the *Handbook* received in the classroom, students and teachers alike have urged us to publish the book in a less expensive, paperback iteration. We and our publisher, Sage Publications, decided to figure out a plan to do this.

Peter Labella, our editor at Sage, canvassed more than 50 scholars and students about the way the *Handbook* works in the classroom setting. Through a series of phone interviews and e-mail surveys—which themselves led to an ongoing conversation—a plan to do the book as a series of paperbacks began to emerge. The three-volume plan was codified at a series of meetings in the spring of 1997.

It was decided that the part structure of the *Handbook* could serve as a useful point of departure for the organization of the paperbacks. Thus Volume 1, titled *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues,* takes a look at the field from a broadly theoretical perspective, and is composed of the *Handbook*'s Parts I ("Locating the Field"), II ("Major Paradigms and Perspectives"), and VI ("The Future of Qualitative Research." Volume 2, titled *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry,* focuses on just that, and consists of Part III of the *Handbook.* Volume 3, titled *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials,* considers the tasks of collecting, analyzing, and interpreting empirical materials, and comprises the *Handbook*'s Parts IV ("Methods of Collecting and Analyzing Empirical Materials") and V ("The Art of Interpretation, Evaluation, and Presentation").

We decided that nothing should be cut from the original *Handbook.* Nearly everyone we spoke to who used the *Handbook* had his or her own way of using it, leaning heavily on certain chapters and skipping others altogether. But there was great consensus that this reorganization made a great deal of sense both pedagogically and economically. We and Sage are

committed to making this iteration of the *Handbook* accessible for classroom use. This commitment is reflected in the size, organization, and price of the paperbacks, as well as in the addition of end-of-book bibliographies.

It also became clear in our conversations with colleagues who used the *Handbook* that the single-volume, hard-cover version has a distinct place and value, and Sage will keep the original version available until a revised edition is published.

◆ Organization of This Volume

Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry isolates the major strategies—historically, the research methods—that researchers can use in conducting concrete qualitative studies. The question of methods begins with the design of the qualitative research project. This always begins with a socially situated researcher who moves from a research question to a paradigm or perspective, and then to the empirical world. So located, the researcher then addresses the range of methods that can be employed in any study. The history and uses of these strategies are explored extensively in this volume.

◆ Acknowledgments

Of course, this book would not exist without its authors or the editorial board members for the *Handbook* on which it is based. These individuals were able to offer both long-term, sustained commitments to the project and short-term emergency assistance.

In addition, we would like to thank the following individuals and institutions for their assistance, support, insights, and patience: our respective universities and departments, as well as Jack Bratich and Rob Leffel, our respective graduate students. Without them, we could never have kept this project on course. There are also several people to thank at Sage Publications. We thank Peter Labella, our new editor; this three-volume version of the *Handbook* would not have been possible without Peter's wisdom, support, humor, and grasp of the field in all its current diversity. Peter had the vision to understand how a three-volume set could be better suited to the classroom and to the needs of students than the original format of the *Handbook*.

As always, we appreciate the efforts of Lenny Friedman, the director of marketing at Sage, along with his staff, for their indefatigable efforts in getting the word out about the *Handbook* to teachers, researchers, and methodologists around the world. Astrid Virding was essential in moving this project through production; we are also grateful to the copy editor, Judy Selhorst, and to those whose proofreading and indexing skills were so central to the publication of the *Handbook* on which these volumes are based. Finally, as ever, we thank our spouses, Katherine Ryan and Egon Guba, for their forbearance and constant support.

The idea for this three-volume paperback version of the *Handbook* did not arise in a vacuum, and we are grateful for the feedback we received from countless teachers and students, both informally and in response to our formal survey. We wish especially to thank the following individuals: Jim Barott, University of Utah; Joanne Cooper, University of Hawaii; Fran Crawford, Curtin University; Morten Ender, University of North Dakota; Rich Hoffman, Miami University of Ohio; Patti Lather, Ohio State University; Michael Lissack, Henley-on-Thames; Martha MacLeod, University of Northern British Columbia; Suzanne Miller, University of Buffalo; Peggy Rios, University of Miami; Cynthia Russell, University of Tennessee, Memphis; Diane Schnelker, University of Northern Colorado; Coleen Shannon, University of Texas at Arlington; Barry Shealy, University of Buffalo; Ewart Skinner, Bowling Green State University; Jack Spencer, Purdue University; and Carol Tishelman, Karolinska Institute.

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Introduction to This Volume

◆ Qualitative researchers think historically, interactionally, and structurally. They attempt to identify the varieties of men and women who prevail in a given historical period (Mills, 1959, p. 7). Such scholars seek to examine the major public and private issues and personal troubles that define a particular historical moment. Qualitative researchers self-consciously draw upon their own experiences as a resource in their inquiries. They always think reflectively, historically, and biographically. They seek strategies of empirical inquiry that will allow them to make connections among lived experience, larger social and cultural structures, and the here and now. These connections are forged out the empirical materials that are gathered in any given investigation.

Empirical inquiry, of course, is shaped by paradigm commitments and by the recurring questions that any given paradigm, or interpretive perspective, asks about human experience. Critical theorists, for example examine the material conditions and systems of ideology that reproduce class structures. Ethnic and feminist researchers examine the stereotypes, prejudices, and injustices connected to race, ethnicity, and gender.

The researcher-as-*bricoleur* is always already in the empirical world of experience. Still, this world is confronted, in part, through the lens that the scholar's paradigm, or interpretive perspective, provides. In turn, the world so conceived ratifies the individual's commitment to the paradigm in question. However, as specific investigations are planned and carried out, two issues must be confronted immediately: research design and choice of strategy of inquiry.[1] We take them up in order. Each resolves into a variety of related questions and issues that must also be addressed.

◆ Research Design

The research design, as analyzed by Valerie Janesick, situates the investigator in the empirical world.[2] Four basic questions structure the issue of design: (a) How will the design connect to the paradigm being used? That is, how will empirical materials be informed by and interact with the paradigm in question? (b) Who or what will be studied? (c) What strategies of inquiry will be used? (d) What methods or research tools will be used for collecting and analyzing empirical materials?

Paradigm, Perspective, and Metaphor

The positivist, postpositivist, constructionist, and critical paradigms dictate, with varying degrees of freedom, the design of a qualitative research investigation. This can be looked at as a continuum, with rigorous design principles on one end and emergent, less well-structured directives on the other. Positivist research designs place a premium on the early identification and development of a research question and a set of hypotheses, choice of a research site, and establishment of sampling strategies, as well as a specification of the research strategies and methods of analysis that will be employed. A research proposal may be written that lays out the stages and phases of the study. These phases may be conceptualized in terms of those outlined by Janice Morse in this volume (reflection, planning, entry, data collection, withdrawal from the field, analysis, and write-up). This proposal may also include a budget, a review of the relevant literature, a statement concerning protection of human subjects, a copy of consent forms, interview schedules, and a timeline. Positivist designs attempt to anticipate all of the problems that may arise in a qualitative study. Such designs provide rather well-defined road maps for the researcher. The scholar working in this tradition hopes to produce a work that finds its place in the literature on the topic being studied.

In contrast, much greater ambiguity is associated with postpositivist and nonpositivist designs—those based, for example, on the constructivist or critical theory paradigms or the ethnic, feminist, or cultural studies perspectives. In studies shaped by these paradigms and perspectives there is less emphasis on formal grant proposals, well-formulated hypotheses, tightly defined sampling frames, structured interview schedules, and predetermined research strategies and methods and forms of analysis. The researcher follows a path of discovery, using as a model qualitative works

that have achieved the status of classics in the field. Enchanted, perhaps, by the myth of the Lone Ethnographer, the scholar hopes to produce a work that has the characteristics of a study done by one of the giants of the past (Malinowski, Mead, Bateson, Goffman, Becker, Strauss, Wolcott).

The Dance of Design

Janesick presents a fluid view of the design process. Influenced by Martha Graham, Elliot Eisner, and John Dewey, she approaches the problem of research design from an aesthetic, artistic, and metaphoric perspective. With Dewey and Eisner, she sees research design as a work of art: as an event, a process, with phases connected to different forms of problematic experience, and their interpretation and representation. Art molds and fashions experience. In its dance form, art becomes a choreographed production, with distinct phases: warming up, exercises and design decisions, cooling down, interpretation, evaluation, and criticism.

Qualitative research design decisions parallel the warm-up, exercise, and cool-down periods of dance. Just as dance mirrors and creates life, so too do research designs adapt, change, and mold the very phenomena they are intended to examine. Janesick fits traditional design questions (research questions, research sites, timelines, research strategies) into this framework. She then addresses the problems involved in pilot studies, interdisciplinary triangulation, and alternative views of validity, reliability, and generalizability, criticizing the "methodolatry" (preoccupation with method) of many traditional, positivist approaches to these topics.

Thus do paradigms shape the interpretive imaginations of qualitative researchers.

Who and What Will Be Studied?

The who and what of qualitative studies involve cases, or instances of phenomena and/or social processes. Three generic approaches may be taken to the question of who or what will be studied. First, a single case, or single process, may be studied, what Robert Stake calls the intrinsic case study. Here the researcher examines in detail a single case or instance of the phenomenon in question—for example, a classroom, or the process of death and dying as given in the single case of a dying patient (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Fiske's discussion of his study of the weekly media viewing patterns of a group of college students living in the same house is

another example of the single-case, single-process approach. His research design took him to a site and told him what questions to ask and what methods to use in answering them. This is what any research design does.

Second, the researcher may focus on a number of cases, in what Stake calls the collective case approach. These cases are then analyzed in terms of their specific and generic properties. Third, the researcher can examine multiple instances of a process as that process is displayed in a variety of different cases. For instance, Denzin's (1987) study of relapse in the careers of recovering alcoholics examined types of relapses across several different types of recovering careers. This process approach is then grounded or anchored in specific cases.

Research designs vary, of course, depending on the needs of multifocus or single-focus case and process inquiries. Different sampling issues arise in each situation. These needs and issues also vary according to the paradigm being employed.

Every instance of a case or process bears the stamp of the general class of phenomena it belongs to. However, any given instance is likely to be particular and unique. Thus, for example, any given classroom is like all classrooms, but no two classrooms are the same.

For these reasons, many postpositivist, constructionist, and critical theory qualitative researchers employ theoretical or purposive, and not random, sampling models (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 62-65). They seek out groups, settings, and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur. At the same time, a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 101-115) among groups, concepts, and observations is necessary, as the researcher seeks to develop an understanding that encompasses all instances of the process, or case, under investigation. A focus on negative cases is a key feature of this process.

These sampling and selection issues would be addressed differently by a postmodern ethnographer in the cultural studies tradition. This investigator would be likely to place greater stress on the intensive analysis of a small body of empirical materials (cases and processes), arguing, after Sartre (1981, p. ix) that no individual or case is ever just an individual or a case. He or she must be studied as a single instance of more universal social experiences and social processes. The person, Sartre (1981) states, is "summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as a singularity" (p. ix). Thus to study the particular is to study the general. For this reason, any case will

necessarily bear the traces of the universal; consequently, there is less interest in the traditional positivist and postpositivist concerns with negative cases, generalizations, and case selection. The researcher assumes that readers will be able, as Robert Stake argues, to generalize subjectively (or "naturalistically") from the case in question to their own personal experiences.

◆ Strategies of Inquiry

The *strategy of inquiry* comprises the skills, assumptions, and practices used by the researcher-as-*bricoleur* when moving from a paradigm and a research design to the collection of empirical materials. Strategies of inquiry connect researchers to specific approaches and methods for collecting and analyzing empirical materials. The case study, for example, relies on interviewing, observing, and document analysis. Research strategies locate paradigms in specific empirical sites and in specific methodological practices—for example, making a case an object of study.

We turn now to a brief review of the strategies discussed in this work. Each is connected to a complex literature with its own history, its own exemplary works, and its own set of preferred ways for putting the strategy into motion. Each strategy also has its own set of problems involving the positivist, postpositivist, and postmodern legacies.

The Case Study

Stake argues that not all case studies are qualitative, although many are. Focusing on those that are attached to the naturalistic, holistic, cultural, and phenomenological paradigms, he contends that the case study is not a methodological choice, but a choice of object to be studied, such as a child or a classroom (for other views of this method, see the essays in Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; for arguments over what a case is, see the chapters in Ragin & Becker, 1992).[3]

Ultimately, the researcher is interested in a process, or a population of cases, not an individual case. Stake, as noted above, identifies several types of case studies (intrinsic, instrumental, collective) and outlines the uses, varieties, and problems (bias, theory, triangulation, telling the story, case selection, ethics) of each. He notes that case researchers routinely provide information on such topics as the nature of the case, its historical back-

ground, and its relation to contexts and other cases, as well as on their informants.

Ethnography and Participant Observation

Ethnography is perhaps the most hotly contested site in qualitative research today. Traditionalists (positivists), postpositivists, and postmodernists compete over the definitions of this field, the criteria that are applied to its texts, and the reflexive place of the researcher in the interpretive process (see Bruner, 1993). Many argue that the ethnographic text is a fiction fashioned out of the researcher's engagement with the world studied. Accordingly, such texts can be evaluated only in terms of their ability to create a sense of verisimilitude for the reader. Others set forth rigorous criteria for the production and evaluation of ethnographic texts (several chapters in this volume and in Volume 3 of this series take up these issues).

Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley steer a careful course down the middle of these several controversies. They argue that ethnographic methods rely chiefly on participant observation. Such methods are characterized by the collection of relatively unstructured empirical materials, a small number of cases, and a writing and style of analysis that are primarily interpretive, involving descriptions of phenomena. Atkinson and Hammersley sketch the history of this method, from Malinowski to the present. They also outline contemporary problems surrounding ethnography, including the so-called science of ethnography, how ethnographic texts represent lived experience, ethnographic authority, the ethical issues involved in studying the "Other," and the literary turn in recent anthropological work (see also Atkinson, 1992; Hammersley, 1992).

Noting the literary turn in ethnography, Atkinson and Hammersley caution against a wholesale relativism that treats all texts as fiction. In turn, they reject a naive realism that says texts easily represent reality. At the same time, they reject many postpositivist criteria for evaluating texts, arguing that these criteria often fail to make clear distinctions between the means and the procedures for establishing the goals of reliability and validity. Although they do not fully develop it in their contribution to this volume, Atkinson and Hammersley have in other work articulated a subtle realism that sets forth two criteria: validity, which asks how truthful, plausible, and credible an account is; and relevance, or whether an account

has relevance for theory or social policy (see, e.g., Hammersley, 1992, pp. 69-78).

Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, and Interpretive Practice

James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium examine that family of qualitative research approaches concerned with reality-constituting interpretive practices (phenomenology, ethnomethodology). These approaches examine how human beings construct and give meaning to their actions in concrete social situations. Many researchers in this tradition use participant observation and interviewing as ways of studying the interpretive practices persons use in their daily lives. Other scholars, those more firmly rooted in the ethnomethodological tradition, criticize the use of any method as a tool, seeing methods instead as practices that produce verifiable findings for any given paradigm.

Holstein and Gubrium draw attention to the interpretive procedures and practices that give structure and meaning to everyday life. These practices are both the topic of and the resources for qualitative inquiry. All knowledge is always local, situated in a local culture and embedded in organizational sites. This local culture embodies cultural stereotypes and ideologies, including understandings about race, class, and gender, and is part of what Dorothy Smith (1993) calls the ruling apparatuses and relations of ruling of society. Holstein and Gubrium show how Smith's project concretely articulates a critical theory of discourse and social structure. Smith's feminist standpoint epistemology connects the ethnomethodological project to critical, feminist, Marxist theory.

The emphasis on interpretive resources, local cultures, and the artful production of meaning connects ethnomethodology, Holstein and Gubrium argue, to deconstructionism and the postmodern context. Such a connection also enlivens the reflexive and reflective turn in qualitative research, calling attention, again and again, to the situated practices that constitute and define this project.

Grounded Theory

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin give an overview of the origins, purposes, and uses of grounded theory, which is a general methodology for

developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. Grounded theory may be the most widely employed interpretive strategy in the social sciences today. It gives the researcher a specific set of steps to follow that are closely aligned with the canons of "good science." Strauss and Corbin compare this methodology with other approaches to qualitative research, noting that a major difference lies in the explicit commitment to theory development and theory verification. (This methodology can be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies.) Basic strategies include theoretical sampling, systematic coding, and guidelines for achieving conceptual density, variation, and integration. A conditional matrix is used to connect and specify the place of micro and macro conditions and consequences in a resulting theory.

Critics have argued that grounded theory has yet to feel the direct influence of the newer, feminist, postmodern arguments, although Strauss and Corbin disagree. Some critics have suggested that the authors remain vague on how verification is accomplished, and many have questioned the status of data and the actor's perspective within the theory. Others have commented on the perceived tendency of researchers to impose their own order on empirical materials (see Glaser, 1992). As presented by Strauss and Corbin, grounded theory methodology remains firmly entrenched within the modernist, postpositivist tradition.

The Biographical Method

Louis Smith reminds us that every text is biographical, as he outlines the biographical method, which seeks to report on and document the history of a person's life. All methods are biographical in the sense that they work outward and inward from the personal histories of the researcher and those studied. Smith shows how the biographical method cuts across all social science disciplines, creating its own subject matter as it goes along. Writers, that is, create the lives they write about. This method takes many different forms: objective, historical, artistic, narrative, personal, collective, institutional, fictional. The method is filled with problems when put into use, including the factual status of the materials utilized; how these materials are retrieved, organized, and then used; the conventions that structure the genre itself; and how and where the biographer is located in the biographical text.

Every qualitative study involves the intersection of public and private lives and biographies. Many researchers study problems anchored in their personal biographies. How these biographical materials can become part