

**3** EDITION

**INTRODUCING**

**COMMUNICATION**

**RESEARCH**

**PATHS OF  
INQUIRY**

**DONALD  
TREADWELL**



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# CHAPTER 11

## Watching and Listening

### Qualitative Research for In-Depth Understanding

*Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*

—Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

#### Chapter Overview

Not all human communication can be summarized satisfactorily as a “6” on a 7-point scale. As the above quote from Albert Einstein suggests, qualitative approaches to human communication may provide more insights and different insights than quantitative approaches. Intuitively, watching people and talking with them often seem preferable to measurement as research approaches, just as comprehension and understanding often seem preferable to simply being informed as research goals.

The methods discussed in this chapter—interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and observational methods—are all essentially qualitative methods, and all may be used online as well as offline. More importantly, they share a common goal of trying to understand and interpret human behavior. Excellent listening, interviewing, and observational skills are needed to obtain valid understandings of human communication, and excellent reporting skills are needed to capture and convey to readers your research methods and what you have learned from your research participants.

#### Chapter Objectives

This chapter will help you

- List the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research methods.
- Compare and contrast qualitative methods with quantitative methods.
- Explain, with examples, how to conduct the major methods of qualitative research.
- Compare and contrast online qualitative methods with traditional qualitative methods.
- Explain, with examples, the basics of coding qualitative data.
- Identify and discuss potential ethical issues with interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and unobtrusive measures.

## Introduction: Advantages and Disadvantages of Watching and Listening Methods

This chapter covers some basic qualitative approaches to communication research—**interviews, focus groups, ethnography, observational studies, and unobtrusive measures.**

Overall, these methods offer the opportunity to explore the thinking and communication behavior of individuals in depth. Interviews and focus groups are particularly well suited to capturing people's opinions in their own words. Ethnographic methods can capture behavior and language, as well as people's explanations of language and behavior, and can provide a check on the relationship between people's expressed views and their behaviors. Qualitative research can use naturally occurring data—that is, direct contact with human communication. In contrast, surveys and experimental methods are obliged to view communication through the lenses of questionnaires or experimental manipulation, respectively.

Researchers who research human communication in “full listening mode” are likely to be rewarded with insights, language, and unique logics and reasonings that surveys and experiments may not uncover. Such researchers are more likely to discover minority and dissident voices and to emerge with new understandings and insights in contrast to the mere confirmation or disconfirmation of an idea that surveys and experiments largely provide.

Because many observational methods emphasize working with research participants in real-life settings, their findings are likely to have a much higher validity compared with the results of experimental research, which typically takes place in artificial settings.

At a practical level, interviews and focus groups can be set up quickly relative to experiments, which may take some time to organize. Interviews especially can be set up immediately, sometimes as the fortuitous outcomes of fleeting opportunities. However, observational methods are not automatically more convenient than quantitative methods. For example, the fieldwork for a sound observational study may take months, if not years, whereas a survey—a predominantly quantitative method—can be completed in days if not hours.

Disadvantages of qualitative methods include the fact that the variability of human behavior over time puts a question mark over the reliability of findings. Because the participants in an interview or discussion are typically selected on the basis of judgment by the researcher rather than by random assignment, there can be questions about the validity of the selection and the extent to which participants represent a broader population.

The nature and level of interaction between the researcher and research participants affect what is observed and reported, and so how to account for the researcher's own influence on the outcome of an interview or observation becomes an issue.

In summary, qualitative methods offer insight, understanding, and validity but not necessarily reliability or the ability to generalize with a high level of confidence.

## Qualitative and Quantitative: Similarities and Differences

At first glance, the difference between the approaches discussed in this chapter and the surveys and experiments discussed in previous chapters is the difference between qualitative and quantitative. It is important to realize, though, that the “qualitative or quantitative” question is neither the first nor the most important difference. Rather, as noted in Chapter 2, it is a secondary question that comes after the researcher has made basic assumptions about people and the basic purposes of his or her research.

As Curt (1994) points out, “all research is participant observational whether people recognize it or not” (p. 121). Anyone who researches human communication does so by directly or indirectly observing it.

Qualitative and quantitative researchers differ not so much on the use of words versus numbers as on the purpose of the research, its generalizability, and their assumptions about human nature. **Quantitative** researchers look for relationships among phenomena; **qualitative** researchers look to understand phenomena as seen through the eyes of their research participants.

As cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) phrased it, the difference is between an experimental science in search of law and an **interpretive** one in search of meaning.

Let’s take an example. Every now and then I purchase a lottery ticket. Why? There are many reasons. Retiring as a millionaire would give me a feeling of security in my old age and would fund a first-class trip around the world. If I won a million dollars, I could be really generous to friends and relatives. Donating a million dollars to my graduate school might get a lecture theater named after me. Maybe a million donated to medical research would help advance cancer research or the fight against malnutrition. With respect to a state lottery, I might even decide that spending money on lottery tickets will hold off an increase in my taxes because the greater the state lottery revenues are, the less likely an increase in taxes will occur. Behind all this, though, is my basic belief that I have a 50-50, flip-of-the-coin chance of hitting that magic winning number. Heads I win; tails I don’t. For a couple of dollars, that seems to be a gamble worth taking. Right?

“Wrong!” thunder the statisticians. You have a better chance of being struck by lightning than ever winning a lottery. Go to the website for any lottery, and you will discover that odds of hitting a winning number are in the order of one in several million. (As I write this, the multistate “Powerball” lottery has posted the odds of winning its jackpot prize as one in 175,223,510.)

Looking at these two different perspectives, we can understand the basic difference in assumptions between survey and experimental methods and the watching and listening methods described in this chapter. Both points of view with respect to winning a lottery are valid. It’s just that one is valid from the external viewpoint of a statistician looking at probabilities and the other is valid from the internal, subjective viewpoint of a research participant.

The important difference is that it is the individual’s subjective viewpoint that explains the purchase of lottery tickets more than any external logic of statistical probability. We can argue, then, that perhaps the best explanations of human communication behavior will come from understanding individual subjectivities, and that these subjectivities by definition can be expected to vary from individual to individual. Researchers will not be able to capture those subjectivities unless they observe participants closely and/or provide participants with opportunities in the form of interviews or focus groups to express them. Ultimately, this is the basic rationale for qualitative methods.

## Researcher–Participant Relationships

A basic research decision is the level at which we engage with the people whose communication behavior we seek to understand. In principle, the closer we get to naturally occurring behaviors, the greater our understanding of them is likely to be. It is this basic assumption that leads researchers to observe or participate in communication in natural settings such as assembly lines, schools, hospitals, bars, or college campuses.

There is an interaction between the act of observation and what we observe and report. We can strive for distance and an impartial relationship with our informants and perhaps miss important insights, or we can decide that close personal involvement will produce more detailed accounts of our informants’ lives, framed though the accounts may be by our own subjectivity. This basic

decision about one's relationship with research participants is common to all of the research approaches outlined in this chapter.

Gold (1958) described four possible relationships a researcher might have with research participants:

- The complete observer has no interaction with informants; they are not aware that they are being observed.
- The observer-as-participant role happens in one-visit scenarios, according to Gold. Because the level of involvement is low, possibly working with a lot of people in a short time, researchers in this role may inadequately understand or misunderstand their informants.
- The participant-as-observer role occurs typically in studies of communities, where the researcher may spend some time. Over time, mutual trust may develop between researcher and research participants, but within this trust lie potential problems. For example, as the relationship approaches friendship, one or both parties may be reluctant to ask or to answer questions in a way that will hurt the friendship.
- In the complete-participant role, the researcher participates so closely in informants' lives that his or her research role may be unknown to them. A potential problem with this role is that researchers may become so involved in their participant role that they cannot function well as observers.

The precise balance between participant and observer is a function of how best to study the communication phenomena you are interested in, how each of the above roles might shape the nature of the data you gather and your reporting, and the ethical standards influencing your relationship(s) with research participants.

## Watching and Listening Methods

In this chapter, we will follow a hypothetical research project focusing on students' use of social media. We will follow Bonnie—the observant director of a campus career services office—as she uses qualitative research methods to get some insight on a campus trend affecting her work. Her office has two major responsibilities. The first is preparing students for the world of employment by offering, for example, workshops in the art of the employment interview, networking, and résumé preparation. The second is alerting students to new employment opportunities.

Bonnie describes the effects that students' ever-increasing use of social media seems to be having on the services her office provides. For example, she is seeing a dramatic decline in the number of students using career center job search resources because, she thinks, they are bypassing the career services office and directly accessing the many online search services. Similarly, workshops on networking and résumé preparation are poorly attended. She speculates that this is because students are actively networking via social media and see no need for workshops on how to do that. As for résumé workshops, one student has told her, "We don't need them. Every job application is online now. You just go online and answer the questions."

Bonnie tries to summarize the pluses and minuses of social media with respect to her getting students successfully employed.

She hypothesizes that students who are active in the social media world will be more likely than less active students to be informed of the job market and to have good job search competencies. However, a second hypothesis is that they are more likely to lack such interpersonal skills as maintaining a face-to-face conversation, interviewing, problem solving with a team, cross-cultural communication, and superior-subordinate communication. In either case, there



are practical implications for the career center, which may have to shift the type of services and training it offers. Of course, Bonnie may find no evidence to support her hypotheses. It may well be that students who are active social media users are highly competent in interpersonal skills, teamwork, and problem solving; it is just that they do it online rather than face-to-face.

A logical start to getting some answers would be to interview students.

## Interviews

Essentially, an interview is a conversation between a researcher and one or more **interviewees**. Interviewees, the individuals interviewed, may be **informants**—individuals selected because they can talk about others as well as themselves—or **respondents**, who are basically defined as speaking only for themselves.

At the heart of the conversation is a series of questions the interviewer wants answered. At one extreme are very specific questions requiring nothing more than a simple “yes/no” response. At the other extreme are questions based on the researcher’s assumption that she does not necessarily know what is going on and therefore must take an open-minded, exploratory approach. This case calls for generic, **open-ended questions**, starting perhaps with something like “I’m new to this; can you explain to me what’s going on here?”

### Interview Structure

As Bonnie is at the beginning of her research project and has hypotheses that are tentative for now, it is most likely that she will start with unstructured interviews.

**Unstructured interviews** come from the researcher’s decision that she needs to understand communication phenomena in her informants’ own terms. In this situation, interviews will at least begin with very broad, open-ended “tell me about . . .” questions. There is no predetermined set of questions although as the interview progresses the questions are likely to become more focused and tuned to the researcher’s basic interests.

Unstructured interviews allow the interviewer to establish a relationship with the interviewee and to deal with any questions or anxieties the interviewee may have. They give the interviewer a sense of any agenda the interviewee may have and insight into the interviewee’s language and vocabulary. Understanding interviewees’ vocabulary is essential if the interview is going to be used to develop specific survey questions that need to be fully understood and unambiguous. They are also the starting point for an in-depth exploration of interviewees’ meaning and logic (for example, do students categorize online classes as social media?). They are also an opportunity to begin “snowball sampling” if the researcher needs to recruit additional participants to the study.

**Semistructured interviews** dictate the broad questions to be asked, but the interviewer has discretion in how the questions will be asked. The interviewer may even drop some questions to allow respondents to respond fully to more important (to the researcher) questions. The interviewer might also ask additional questions with the aim of eliciting full and responsive answers. For a semistructured interview, Bonnie may decide that she has two broad questions: What sources of information do students use to find jobs, and where do they get advice on interview skills? The questions are important and guide the interview, but they are general because “sources of information” may also include people, movies, and newspapers, not necessarily just social media. Because there are only two questions, she has time for follow-up questions and for interviewees to volunteer information they think is important. Semistructured interviews keep the interview focused but allow both the interviewer and the interviewee room to move.

**Fully structured interviews** mean that the interviewer becomes not much more than a recording device. In this type of interview, the researcher has determined what questions are

important, their format, and the order in which they will be asked. In our example, Bonnie would have a specific list of questions related to use of specific social media, the role of friends in a job search, attitudes toward the career center, and the like. She could ask the questions by phone, mail, or web or have someone else ask the questions because she has no plans to digress from these questions. The questions may even be formatted as Likert-type, semantic differential, or multiple-choice questions.

The interview **structure** we choose will be determined largely by our theoretical starting point. If our research objective is to obtain new insights, then we will prefer unstructured interviews that maximize the opportunity for interviewees to talk. We are open to the possibility that an interview related to social media and finding employment may have interviewees free-associating about texting, online movies, or why they “tweet” their friends but not their parents.

By contrast, we might have developed specific hypotheses based on our reading of, for example, **uses and gratifications theory**. Uses and gratifications theory proposes that media audiences are not passive media consumers but are active in selecting the media content to which they expose themselves, and that they do so for a variety of reasons. These reasons include, for example, surveillance of the world for events and issues that might affect them, diversion or escape from routine and problems, or substituting the media for companionship and personal relationships. Research to determine how frequently these reasons are mentioned by interviewees may generate very structured interviews with very specific questions, perhaps even scaled or ranking questions.

Effective interviews require practice, preparation, and attention to each of the following aspects.

### Interview Persona

It is important to develop trust and a rapport with interviewees. What kind of person might best accomplish this? Another person just like them; a high-powered scholarly PhD researcher; a newcomer hoping to learn from them; a compassionate, engaged, empathetic listener; or a dispassionate, neutral, nonjudgmental listener? We are all predisposed to respond differently to questions depending on who asks them. Consider, for example, how you might respond differently to personal questions from a physician, a police officer, a psychologist, or a work colleague.

While you will not have this range of roles available to you, you certainly will have choices as to how you present yourself to interviewees, and, as the saying goes, you have only one opportunity to present a first impression. In terms of introducing yourself successfully, honesty is probably the best policy for reasons of ethics, credibility, and maintaining a consistent persona, but note from the Ethics Panel in this chapter that positioning yourself as a different person may be necessary and that necessary deceptions may be approved by institutional review boards (IRBs).

### Interview Setting

Just as an experimental setting may influence the results of experimental research, so too can the interview setting affect the nature of the interview. For example, Bonnie may have student interviewees come to her office; meet them in a dining area; or, moving into ethnographic mode, sit with them in campus apartments while she observes their use of social media and the Internet. Each setting has advantages and disadvantages. In Bonnie’s case, students may feel more relaxed about meeting on neutral space such as a dining area rather than in an administrator’s office or in what they may regard as the private space of their apartments. Interviews in her office may free interviewees from feelings of peer pressure but then have them feeling a need to provide answers that they think she is looking for.

Workplace interviews will require the permission of management, and workplace settings may constrain what employees feel they can tell you.

### Interview Sensitivities

Consider religious, cultural, and technology sensitivities when arranging interviews. For cross-cultural interviews in particular, dress, body language, vocabulary, status, and gender relations all need to be considered. For example, first-name relationships may be inappropriate. Intermediaries may be needed to set up interviews or to conduct them on your behalf. For example, Xerri (2005) reports how he used his sisters to set up interviews with women who for cultural reasons would have otherwise been reluctant to be interviewed by a male.

### Interview Recording

Audio- or video-recording interviews can save you from taking notes and allow you to focus on the interview. However, people may “clam up” in front of a camera, may be nervous about what will happen to the recorded interview, or may decide to talk “for the record.” In other words, what they say “on the record” may differ from what they might have told you “off the record.” You have an ethical obligation to disclose that the interview will be recorded, if that is your plan, and may have to negotiate whether recording will happen or not.

### Interview Sequence

**Sequence** refers to the order in which questions occur. You will recall from Chapter 9 that often a “**funnel**” metaphor is used to describe question order. In a funnel format, questions move from broad and general to narrow and specific. An “**inverted funnel**” sequence means that the interview starts with specific questions and moves to broader questions.

For example, a funnel sequence of questions on social media and the job search might begin with “Generally, how do you feel about social media?” The “how do you feel . . . ?” question opens up the opportunity to ask more specific follow-up questions, and the interviewee’s answers provide the interviewer with a launchpad for further questions exploring social media use. An inverted funnel sequence might begin with the specific “How many times this semester have you applied for a job online?” In this case, interviewees are presented with a specific question that should be easy to answer and that gives them a level of confidence about answering more general questions that ask them to elaborate on and explain the first answer.

Most interviews begin with questions such as class year or job title that most informants can easily handle. Note, though, that seemingly harmless questions such as age and religion or even names may be intensely personal and emotional to interviewees and not a good starting point for an interview. If you sense that these questions might affect substantive aspects of the interview, it would be wise to consider whether they are necessary.

### Interview Question Types

You need different types of questions to fully elicit, probe, and interpret informants’ understandings of the phenomena you are interested in. Anthropology professor James Spradley (1979) developed several question categories that can be summarized as follows:

- **Descriptive questions** ask informants to describe the phenomena. “Mini-tour” questions are one type of descriptive question that ask for an overview of everyday occurrences. For example, “In a typical semester, how do you use your social networking sites?”
- **Structural questions** explore the relationships among the terms informants use. For example, “Would you describe an online job search as part of your social networking?”



- **Contrast questions** help the researcher understand differences between and the relative importance of informants' concepts. For example, "You talk about 'job search' and 'career search.' Could you explain the difference between these two?" Another type of contrast question is a rating or **ranking question**. For example, "With respect to job searches, you talked about search engines, social media, and texting. Which of these two are most similar? Which one would you say differs most from the other two? Why?"

If you use all of the above question types, you can have some confidence that you have thoroughly explored your interviewees' views of their worlds and that you have an in-depth understanding of them.

### Interview Question Prompts

No type of question guarantees an answer. Interviewees may be nonresponsive for many reasons. They may be naturally reticent, protective of sensitive information, puzzled about which one of several possible answers they should provide, or intimidated by the perceived status of the interviewer, or they may simply have misunderstood the question.

What to do? Use **prompts**. Prompts are simply the follow-up questions that elicit more information and keep the interview progressing. Classic prompts include "tell me more" and the "5Ws + H" of journalism—for example, *Who* (else feels the same way that you do?), *What* (are the steps involved in \_\_\_?), *When* (do most people \_\_\_?), *Where* (did you first \_\_\_?), *Why* (do you say that?), and *How* (does \_\_\_ differ from \_\_\_?).

Reflecting interviewees' words back to them may get a further response. For example, "I heard you say that a job is not the same as a career; can you explain that?"

And then there is strategic silence. If you have ever noticed that someone in a discussion will ultimately fill a silence, you have noticed one basic interview technique. Keep silent in the hope that your interviewee will fill the silence.

Interviews need not be 100% talk. As part of an interview, respondents could be asked to demonstrate how they do something (for example, their Internet job search strategies), to describe what they see happening in a video, or to rank order photographs of different products or a series of statements describing their ideal political candidate.

### Focus Groups

A disadvantage of the one-on-one interview is that no matter how well informed and representative of others the interviewee may be, the interviewer is getting the views of only one person and no sense of how others might agree or disagree with those views.

A common method to elicit and test ideas that one single interviewee might not have had is to bring a small group of people together in a focus group. Traditional "in-person" focus groups typically consist of 6 to 12 people in a discussion setting led by a **moderator** or **facilitator** to discuss a topic of interest. Focus groups can be used to explore such pragmatic issues as how people interpret and respond to political campaign messages or to help researchers operationalize theoretical constructs and hypotheses. They are often used before surveys to pretest survey questions and may be used after surveys to help researchers understand the survey results.

Focus groups are based on the assumption that the ideas that emerge from several people discussing a topic can provide greater quality, diversity, and insight than the ideas generated by the same people interviewed separately as individuals. They should provide new insights, concepts, and vocabulary; a sense of why members think the way they do; and the ideas that members agree and disagree on. We hope for a "2 + 2 = 5" effect, noting, however, that a poorly selected group has the potential to provide a "2 + 2 = 3" effect, especially with an inept moderator.

Because focus group members most commonly are sampled judgmentally or on the basis of convenience, the method's major weaknesses are reliability and the ability to generalize to a wider population. Often the reliability question can be addressed by running a second focus group and comparing the results with those from the first group.

Generally focus group participants are selected by the researcher to represent a defined demographic group such as college seniors looking for jobs. Within such groups, the researcher hopes to find a diversity of opinions on the topic by recruiting, for example, social media “geeks” and students who have yet to join a social networking site.

A focus group on students' use of social media would give Bonnie insight on new “buzz words” and terminology that she needs to understand, and, importantly, the meanings that students associate with these words. Ideally, the group should generate new ideas she has not thought of, and also show her areas where students agree and disagree.

Focus group moderators need the skills to encourage reticent members to speak and to control the more verbose members. They need to take a middle ground between allowing group members free expression and keeping the discussion focused on the topic at hand. To keep the discussion on track and to maintain order, it is a good idea to prepare in advance a discussion guide that lists key questions and the question order. The same prompts that help an interview along can be used to prompt a reticent focus group, but the ideal focus group has a level of interaction among its members such that prompting should be unnecessary.

Typically, the group's discussion will be audio- or video-recorded to provide transcripts for subsequent analysis. Professionally run focus groups often take place in a room with one-way mirrors so that observers can follow the discussion without their presence disrupting it. Group members may be offered drinks and snacks and may receive a small payment or a donation to a charity of their choice.

### Online Focus Groups

Increasingly, focus groups are run online, especially in applied communication research areas such as marketing. Online groups offer the advantages of low cost, time saving, and the ability to link people internationally. Focus group software can record the discussion; offer anonymity to participants; and allow the moderator to contact participants individually and, if necessary, privately. Online groups can run for days or weeks as necessary and offer members the convenience of participating from their homes or offices.

The disadvantages of online focus groups include anonymity, the absence of nonverbal communication, and Internet technology itself. The same anonymity that can encourage free and frank discussion can also present a focus group moderator with the problem of knowing who exactly is participating in a group. Online groups that depend on typed responses do not provide moderators with nonverbal cues as to what participants are thinking and how they are interacting. There is a related problem of how to interpret text; for example, online communities often regard USING CAPITAL LETTERS as the equivalent of impolitely shouting at others. Should a moderator regard capitals as someone trying to dominate the discussion, an attempt at emphasis, or perhaps just an inadvertently locked caps key? The technology itself can have a negative impact in that group members with poor Internet connections will be less able to participate. Even with high-speed reliable connections, members with limited keyboard skills will be less able to participate and to express themselves spontaneously.

Online groups may be **asynchronous**, with members contributing in their own time, or **synchronous**, with members interacting in “real time.” The asynchronous mode allows for a greater number of participants and may reduce feelings of pressure to respond to an idea. It may also reduce anxieties about answering sensitive questions and encourage in-depth responses because members can reply to questions in their own time. The synchronous mode is likely to be more

efficient and to stimulate more interaction, but participants may be more likely to tire of the discussion than in asynchronous mode.

A new world for online focus group research is the virtual world of avatars. Houliez and Gamble (2012) explored conducting focus groups with **avatars** in the virtual world of Second Life. They found difficulties ranging from poor audio quality to problems with distributing and getting back consent forms as well as the limitations of navigation and communication by keyboard. On the other hand, virtual groups offer members the advantages of anonymity and the opportunity to express opinions they might not express in the “real world.”

A theoretically and practically important question for moderators of virtual groups is the status of the avatar. Is the research interest in the avatar or the person behind the avatar? The question is further complicated by the fact that one “real” person may be the force behind several different avatars.

You can make your own good assessment of the relative advantages and disadvantages of online, offline, and perhaps virtual focus groups by thinking about your own experience with online and regular in-class discussions and identifying the factors that hindered and facilitated discussion in each case.

Any successful focus group has clear objectives, a membership appropriate to the research questions(s), carefully prepared questions and facilities (offline and/or online), and a moderator who facilitates an active, creative discussion that involves all members and remains focused on the topic.

## Ethnographic Methods

Many varieties of watching and listening research take place under the umbrella of ethnography. Ethnography is basically the study of human social behavior or cultures. The term *ethnography* (from the Greek *ethnos* = people; *graphein* = writing) suggests that we are observing, describing, and interpreting people’s behavior.

Some principles of ethnographic research (adapted from Kirsch, 2001) are

- Conduct research primarily in natural settings.
- Combine direct observation with interviews.
- Focus on local, subjective, knowledge, and categories.
- Engage directly with the community’s members.

A number of important decisions must precede ethnographic research. These include defining research question(s), which may or may not be specific; identifying potential gatekeepers and informants; deciding whether to interview people individually or in groups; choosing between structured and unstructured interviews; and deciding what to observe and how to record, analyze, and present ethnographic data.

Whether the culture of interest is a village, a virtual world, a surgical team, a film studio, or a local pub, ethnographers seek to immerse themselves in the culture and its natural setting. They seek to accurately describe the culture and the behaviors that define it and that differentiate it from other cultures. They seek to understand the culture’s shared meanings that explain its behaviors and norms. While the generic research question is simple—“How and why do things get done in this culture?” or even more simply “What’s going on here?”—getting answers and credible explanations of those answers may take months or years. Because the time available for research may be limited, some communication studies may be “ethnographically informed” rather than being the full ethnographies that may require a researcher’s full immersion for a year or more. For example, it may be possible to study a group of students for only one semester, but not for the four years of their college careers.

In practice, ethnographies of all types begin with the formal and informal **gatekeepers** who make access to a community or culture possible. Formal gatekeepers are those individuals whose permission makes the access officially possible. Access to a work team, for example, will typically require a formal approval from management in return for which the researcher may have to provide written assurances that the organization and the individuals in it will not be identified, that no competing organization is involved in the study, and that no proprietary information will be published. Management approval can be a mixed blessing; you get access to employees but then may have to address employee suspicions about a management-approved survey.

Formal approvals do not necessarily ease the way into the community to be studied. For a successful entry into the community, **key informants** are required. These are the individuals who are part of the study community and who for their own reasons have agreed to introduce the researcher to their community and legitimize the researcher's work as nonthreatening.

Some research requires that researchers work in disguise, for example as “fake” hospital patients or students (see the Ethics Panel in this chapter). It is more likely that researchers will identify themselves as they are—researchers with a genuine interest in how and why the community or culture functions. This reduces the potential for ethically suspect relationships and potential complications such as being exposed as a phony when the members of a work team discover that their fellow employee is not actually an employee.

All ethnographies involve detailed observation and recording, typically in the form of voluminous written notes but increasingly with audio and video recording. Regardless of the recording media, the researcher typically will aim to record a rich diversity of data—behaviors; dress; decor; rites and rituals; language and the meanings associated with specific words and phrases; greetings and salutations; respect for authority; relationships between men and women, old and young, and superiors and subordinates; use of time; work versus social behaviors; and so on.

Generally, ethnographers record at least three different kinds of notes. **Descriptive notes** are the primary records that detail the raw data of human interactions and the settings that are the focus of the ethnography. **Method notes** record the specific methods used to gather data on any given day—for example, direct observation, group interviews, video recording, screen capture, or reading social media content. Method notes are necessary because of the interaction between method and data. For example, individuals are likely to behave and speak differently in one-on-one interviews than they are in a group setting.

**Analytic notes** are the notes the ethnographer writes in order to interpret the raw data. They are reflexive in that the ethnographer will visit and revisit the notes repeatedly, and her theories and explanations will change as the study progresses and as more data are gathered. For example, she might initially see a power relationship between two individuals as best explained by an age difference or a respect for authority and then, as she gathers more data, come to understand the relationship as best explained by a difference in technical expertise. This interpretation would then trigger further observations and interviews. Such “looping back” through data, method notes, and analytic notes continues until the ethnographer is comfortable that there is no new information to be had and that she has considered all possible explanations and arrived at her best possible understanding of the culture she is studying.

At this point, the task becomes writing the best possible narrative that will explain to interested readers how life is lived as a member of the culture. One feature that distinguishes an ethnographic report is the use of the participants' own language. The availability of audiovisual media and hypermedia presents new challenges and opportunities for recording and reporting, as we shall see in Chapter 14.

## Ethnographic Starting Points

“What specifically should I focus on?” can be a difficult question to answer for ethnographic studies because there are so many possible starting points. Sociolinguist Dell Hymes (1974) developed a system for examining communication as a cultural practice and proposed six basic units a researcher might focus on. They are:

- **Speech community**—a group of people who share common signs, a language that differentiates them from other groups, and rules governing their speech. Example: a group of communication majors.
- **Speech situation**—the occasions within a speech community when people talk. Example: An introductory class on research methods or an annual awards dinner.
- **Speech event**—the specific speech activity that takes place. Example: a student presentation or an awards speech.
- **Communicative act**—the smaller units of speech within a speech event. Example: asking a question or telling a joke.
- **Communicative style**—the speech style that is characteristic of someone. Example: being habitually ironic or using “geek” jargon.
- **Ways of speaking**—the styles of speech that may be used in specific situations and events or that are characteristic of a culture. Example: at the beginning of a class, the instructor speaks before students do.

After choosing one of the above units to study, you would then analyze it by asking a set of questions that Hymes developed. These questions are summarized in the acronym SPEAKING, and each item helps a researcher document the language and meanings in a speech community. The SPEAKING items are

- **Situation**—the setting where the activities take place and the overall scene of which they are a part. Example: a college classroom.
- **Participants**—the people present and their roles and relationships within the speech situation. Example: students and faculty.
- **Ends**—the ends or goals of the communication being studied. Example: mastering the language of communication research.
- **Acts**—the language and behaviors that convey meaning to the participants. Example: instructors demonstrating a specific research method.
- **Key**—the tone of speech. How the speech sounds. Example: formal or friendly.
- **Instrumentality**—the channels or methods used to communicate. Example: an online discussion group.
- **Norms**—the rules governing speech and its interpretation. Example: students cannot ask questions until after the instructor has spoken.
- **Genres**—the traditional types of speech found in most cultures. Examples: commencement speeches, election “stump” speeches, lectures, and funeral orations.

By working through Hymes’s units of analysis, we can describe how people communicate, their patterns of communication, and how language is used and understood. This approach is far from being the only entry point into ethnography, but the emphasis on communication and the specific questions to be asked will help you with potential starting points for an ethnographic study.

## Online Ethnography

The approaches and issues outlined in this chapter are all applicable to online ethnography, but online ethnography has some unique characteristics to be considered. For example, the online



world provides no direct observation of human behavior, and the researcher is faced with data unique to the web such as **emoticons**, avatars, web pages, blogs, wikis, and hyperlinks.

Typically, online text, audio, graphics and video can be easily recorded using screen-save software so the effort of recording raw data is much reduced relative to traditional ethnographies. Online ethnographers then face serious decisions about how to analyze and report such data, given that most scholarly research is still reported and published as text.

Kozinets (2013) sees the differences between online and traditional ethnographies such that a new term—**netnography**—becomes necessary for online ethnographies. He defines netnography as “a specialized form of ethnography adapted to the unique computer-mediated contingencies of today’s social worlds” (p. 1). He describes it as an applied, interdisciplinary approach involving anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. Whereas ethnography is entirely face-to-face, netnography is entirely online.

Kozinets’s distinction notwithstanding, there is not necessarily a choice between offline and online ethnography because a research question may well imply both. For example, an exploration of how graduating seniors communicate with each other about employment would be seriously shortchanged if it were restricted to web-only communication or to interpersonal communication only.

Ethnography at first sight may seem unstructured and unfocused, especially coming off a chapter on experimental method in which very specific research designs are proposed to test very specific hypotheses about human communication. It may conjure up the image of earnest explorers in pith helmets living with strange tribes in remote places. The image has some validity as a metaphor for serious, committed, and engaged inquiry into the communication behaviors of others, but ethnographers’ interests are as modern as today, as witness their interests in cyber-ethnography and the seemingly accepted neologism of “netnography.”

## Observational Studies

Observational studies typically record and interpret individual and group behaviors in their natural settings. Ethnography depends upon observation, but not every observational study is an ethnography. You could, for example, observe the behavior of music fans at a rock concert without doing any of the in-depth interviews or long-term observations that ethnography typically requires.

Many qualitative studies are observational without being ethnographies, for example observations of student-teacher interaction in the classroom or of small groups engaged in problem solving. In these two examples, observational methods will not necessarily provide an understanding of what it means to be a teacher, a student, or a member of a group, but they may well provide valid findings about communication and perhaps even reliable findings that will allow us to predict whether a particular teaching style will be effective with reticent students or what specific behaviors most facilitate or hinder a group’s problem solving.

Observational studies use many of the methods described above and possibly even quasi-experimental methods where, for example, a group may be put together specifically to solve a problem assigned by the researcher under conditions defined by the researcher.

At the other extreme, a researcher may have no contact with the individuals being researched at all. This means using unobtrusive measures, as described below.

## Unobtrusive Measures

Unobtrusive measures document people’s behavior without them being aware of it. This can be important where we suspect that there may be a gap between words and action. For example, suppose our research participants assure us in interviews or surveys that they would never text while

driving and that they always wear their seat belts. True? Take a look at campus traffic to observe directly the extent of texting and seat belt usage. Interested in whether your informants' accounts of healthy eating match reality? You can unobtrusively observe campus dining behavior to get a sense of the cheeseburger-to-fruit ratio on cafeteria trays, or you can ask the dining services manager for data on what items are best sellers. Want a check on student alcohol consumption? Check out dormitory or apartment garbage, or campus police records. For a check on campus political sentiments, check out campaign stickers on employee and student vehicles, or graffiti. How might a car dealer decide which radio stations to advertise on? Have service staff record what station each car radio is tuned to when the vehicle comes in for service.

Most unobtrusive measures do not provide a direct check on any one individual's self-report, but they can provide a general sense of whether the self-reports you get of people's behaviors are credible.

## Conversation Analysis

Many research methods are based on observation and listening. For example, **conversation analysis** is a method for analyzing how people negotiate understanding and the rules for understanding. For example, if a question is posed during a conversation or discussion, what are the rules that determine whether it gets an answer or not? If the question does not get an answer from somebody, how does the conversation then change? As the method is in practice an analysis of transcripts of recorded conversations, we discuss conversation analysis further in Chapter 13.

## Making Sense of Qualitative Data

When you gather data on people's behavior by watching and listening, you record words and actions rather than numbers. The question then becomes how to establish a sense of order and interpret what may be hours of audio or video recordings or page after page and box after box of notes, transcripts, or observations.

The basis of many qualitative analyses is **categorization**—that is, identifying each piece of data as belonging to a particular category predetermined by the researcher or generated from the data itself. By analyzing these categories and the relationships among categories, researchers are able to see patterns of behavior or thinking that shed light on their research interests.

Fundamentally, there are three ways of categorizing qualitative information. The first is to assign items to specific nonchanging, preassigned categories (fixed coding). The second is to start with theoretically informed categories that may change as new data come in (flexible coding). The third is to start with no preconceived categories and to allow categories and theories to emerge as data analysis progresses (grounded-in-data coding).

### Fixed Coding

Coding typically means assigning units of information to preassigned categories and then counting the frequency with which these different units occur. Suppose, for example, we are questioning students in an attempt to understand their use of social media. With **fixed coding** we might, for example, hypothesize from a review of the uses and gratifications literature that four important factors will explain students' use of social media—convenience, relaxation, escape, and the opportunity for social interaction with friends. We would then develop a simple record sheet that records the number of times we find each of these mentioned in our data. Such a coding sheet would look like Exhibit 11.1.

**EXHIBIT 11.1** Sample Analysis Sheet for Qualitative Data: Predetermined Categories

Understanding Student Use of Social Media		
Categories Derived From Theory	Number of Mentions	Reasons Item Is Considered Important
Convenience		
Relaxation		
Escape		
Social Viewing		

### Flexible Coding

A problem with fixed coding is that it provides no room for the inevitable “other” categories that will emerge as we read through our interview or focus group transcripts. Furthermore, one of the reasons we listen to people in the first place is to gain new insights. **Flexible coding** allows for new categories to emerge rather than forcing every piece of information into preconceived categories or perhaps one additional and less-than-useful “other” category.

For example, as we read through people’s answers about social media, it appears that there are two broad reasons for using them—convenience and the opportunity to socialize. As we examine the explanations we have been given about convenience, we see that several different notions of “convenience” emerge—geographic (*I can stay home and socialize*), scheduling (*I can socialize anytime*), portability (*I can socialize on my smartphone*), and cost (*I don’t need money to go to the movies or a restaurant*). All of these ideas seem to fit under the umbrella of “convenience,” so we decide to set up four subcategories, as shown in Exhibit 11.2.

Similarly, “socializing” turns out to have three components. Two are perhaps predictable—“relaxation” and “social interaction.” Also, it appears that online socializing is a social learning opportunity in the sense that students learn from other students and recently graduated friends about the social behaviors associated with careers and different types of employment. If students’ definition of social media includes movie sites such as YouTube, they may even be learning about career behaviors specific to criminal justice, health care, business, and entertainment. They may even change courses or majors on the basis of what they learn from such sites. This is clearly a new concept, and it might be reasonable to set up a new “social learning” category called “career skills.” For the moment, use of movie sites appears to be seen as part of socializing, but as our analysis progresses, we may decide that this is a major new concept related to career development and that we will be able to rationalize setting it up as a third major category, alongside “convenience” and “socializing.”

Many qualitative analyses are grounded in an approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) that considers theory as “grounded in data.” That is to say rather than using data to test a theory or hypothesis, the theory itself emerges as the data analysis proceeds.

A basic of the **grounded theory** approach is the “constant comparative method.” In this technique, we would look at statements and ideas that emerge from our observations and assign each statement to a category. The constant comparative method consists of testing each new statement or idea against the categories we have developed and reworking categories as necessary as our data analysis proceeds. We in effect did this in previous paragraphs when we analyzed the data students provided on their use of social media and developed the summary table shown as Exhibit 11.2.

**EXHIBIT 11.2** Sample Analysis Sheet for Qualitative Data: Categories Emerge From Data

Understanding Student Use of Social Media			
Categories Emerge From Data			Working Notes
Convenience	geographic		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Which of these are most used as reasons to use social media?</li> <li>Is there a difference between weeknight relaxation and weekend relaxation?</li> <li>Am I hearing different words for the same concept?</li> <li>Are residents and commuters telling me the same thing?</li> <li>Note: Need to be able to write an account that student would recognize as authentic.</li> </ol>
	scheduling		
	portability of medium		
	cost	money	
		time	
Socializing	relaxation	gaming	
		social planning	
	social interaction	keeping current	
		academic work	
		networking	
	social learning	careers	
work behaviors			

The above examples of coding might be regarded as an analytic approach, in which the number and relationship of categories of data help build a theory about human communication. Another approach is interpretive, in which the researcher probes for the values and motivations that seem to be behind the observed data. The researcher tries to understand what it is that individuals are trying to achieve with, for example, their social media postings or what values define a community for its members and make it different from other communities.

Moving between analysis and interpretation, between data and hypotheses, and between different samples of data can help establish the relative importance of different observations and the relationships among them. Your hypotheses should change and evolve as a result. You can test your hypotheses by looking for data that contradict them. They should become less and less tentative to the point where you can have confidence in proposing a general theory about human communication in a particular setting.

There is no compelling reason to analyze all your data at once. Starting with a small judgmental sample of data may allow you to categorize and interpret it more readily. You can test your initial reading of your data by checking it against a further sample.

## Drowning in Data? CAQDAS to the Rescue

Just as there are statistical programs to handle numeric data, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) handles qualitative data, including text, audio, graphics, video, and social media chat.

Basically, such programs allow the user to enter text such as interviews and then to search for words and phrases and pull together items that are flagged as belonging to a particular category. New coding categories can be created as new ideas emerge from examining the data. Typically, you will be able to search for terms, examine terms in context, display the frequencies of key terms, and produce graphic displays of the relationships among terms. Most programs offer tutorials, webinars, free trials, and user forums. Websites for some such programs are listed at the end of this chapter.

### Ethics Panel: In Which a Professor Becomes a Student

Nathan, R. (2005). *My freshman year: What a professor learned by becoming a student*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

"Rebekah Nathan," a "50-something" professor of anthropology, decided that she needed to better understand her students and their lives. She took a sabbatical leave and, on the basis of her high school transcript, enrolled as a freshman student at her own university for a semester. She moved into a dorm, took on a full course load, ate in the student cafeteria, joined student clubs, played volleyball and tag football, and, of course, attended class and completed (most) assignments.

To understand student life, she drew on interviews and conversations with classmates, and observations and interactions with professors and university staff. The issues she explored included friendships, race relations and social life, classroom participation, eating and sleeping in class, plagiarism, scheduling conflicts, dropping readings and assignments, holding down a job, not holding down food, and relations with faculty.

Nathan did not volunteer that she was a professor but also did not lie if anyone specifically asked her. In day-to-day interactions, she allowed students to assume she was one of them. When conducting formal interviews, she identified herself as a researcher, explained her study, and obtained written permission to publish informants' words. She did reveal her identity to some students with whom she developed a close relationship.

Nathan has been on one hand criticized for enhancing her own academic career at the expense of students and on the other hand commended for following approved procedures such as obtaining informed consent and clearing her study through her university's IRB.

Academic opinion on the need for such "undercover" studies is mixed.

Review Chapter 3, "Ethics: What Are My Responsibilities as a Researcher?" and answer the following.

#### Questions

- Why would "Ms. Nathan" not want to be open about her status, occupation, and reason for being on campus?
- Do you feel that students involved in this study were exploited in any way?
- Do any aspects of this study strike you as ethically suspect? If so, why or why not?
- Nathan's research was approved by the campus IRB. Do you agree or disagree with the board's decision? Why?

#### Resources

American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct . . . . . [www.apa.org/ethics](http://www.apa.org/ethics)

National Communication Association Code of Professional Ethics for the Communication Scholar/Teacher . . . . . [www.natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=2120&terms=code%20of%20professional](http://www.natcom.org/Tertiary.aspx?id=2120&terms=code%20of%20professional)



## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Qualitative methods are generally based on the assumption that people are idiosyncratic and have unique and subjective views of their world. The inability to generalize to a larger population is not therefore regarded as a problem.
- Qualitative researchers may begin with theoretically derived hypotheses or develop theories from research data as it is analyzed.
- Qualitative methods are generally preferred over surveys and experiments for their ability to elicit people's views in their own words.
- Qualitative research may be structured and ask questions predetermined by the researcher or be open ended and elicit ideas that informants volunteer.
- Participant or unobtrusive observation provides a check on whether people's words match their behavior.
- Qualitative studies of online communication must deal with entities unique to the web such as avatars and emoticons and can be limited because much online social behavior is text-based.

## KEY TERMS

acts	instrumentality
analytic notes	interpretive
asynchronous	interviewees
avatars	interviews
categorization	inverted funnel
communicative act	key
communicative style	key informants
contrast questions	method notes
conversation analysis	moderator
descriptive notes	netnography
descriptive questions	norms
emoticons	observational studies
ends	open-ended questions
ethnography	participants
facilitator	prompts
fixed coding	qualitative
flexible coding	quantitative
focus groups	ranking question
fully structured interviews	respondents
funnel	semistructured interviews
gatekeepers	sequence
genres	situation
grounded theory	speech community
informants	speech event

speech situation  
 structural questions  
 structure  
 synchronous

unobtrusive measures  
 unstructured interviews  
 uses and gratifications theory  
 ways of speaking

## APPLICATION EXERCISES

### Exercise 1: An Ethnographic Study

Review in this chapter the broad research question of how students use the Internet to find out about employment and apply for jobs. You decide that the best insights on student job hunting on the Internet will come from an in-depth ethnographic study of students as they do this. Using the Dell Hymes questions outlined in this chapter, set out your plans for such a study. It should include key informants, an outline of the observations you would make, the questions you would ask your research participants, media content that you might want to read, and any permissions that you might need to obtain before your study begins.

### Exercise 2: An Interview

You are interested in how exactly a student might go about using the Internet to locate jobs and apply for them. Assuming that a structured interview with specific questions is the best way to get this information, write out the specific questions you would want to ask a student you know to be highly experienced in the art of the online job search.

### Exercise 3. Understanding Social Media Stress

A Pew Research Center Internet, Science & Tech Project study (Hampton, Rainie, Lu, Shin, & Purcell, 2015) looked at the relationship between social media use and stress. Overall, the researchers found that frequent Internet and social media users do not have higher levels of stress, but there are circumstances under which the use of social media increases awareness of stressful events in the lives of others. Especially for women, this greater awareness is tied to higher levels of stress.

The study used an established scale called the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) that is based on people's answers to 10 questions.

Suppose you wish to explore the relationship between social media use and stress. Which of the approaches discussed in this chapter would you prefer, and why? What advantages might they offer relative to surveys or experiments?

## RECOMMENDED READING

Daymon, C., & Holloway, I. (2010). *Qualitative methods in public relations and marketing communications* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

A guide to planning, implementing, and writing research in the applied fields of public relations and marketing.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *Handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A summary volume on qualitative research.

Garcia, A. C., Standlee, A. I., Bechkoff, J., & Cui, Y. (2009). Ethnographic approaches to the Internet and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38(1), 52–84. DOI: 10.1177/0891241607310839

A summary and discussion of many aspects of online ethnography.

Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Covers the practicalities of planning and running focus groups and analyzing and reporting results.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2010). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shows with examples how qualitative studies are designed, conducted, and written.

Paunksniene, Z., & Banyte, J. (2013). Methodological issues in online qualitative consumer behavior research. *Socialines Technologijos*, 3(2), 261–277. Retrieved from <http://archive.ism.lt/handle/1/529>

Discusses methodological issues related to online qualitative consumer behavior research.

Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Describes 12 steps for developing an ethnographic study. For a sense of how “readable” such studies can be, see also Spradley’s *You Owe Yourself a Drunk: Adaptive Strategies of Urban Nomads* (1970) and *The Cocktail Waitress: Woman’s Work in a Man’s World* (1975). In addition, see Spradley’s *Participant Observation* (1980).

## RECOMMENDED WEB RESOURCES

Atlas.ti . . . . . [www.atlasti.com/product.html](http://www.atlasti.com/product.html)

A qualitative data analysis software package.

Ethnography of Communication . . . . . [www.cios.org/encyclopedia/ethnography/index.htm](http://www.cios.org/encyclopedia/ethnography/index.htm)

An overview of Dell Hymes’s Ethnography of Communication in the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship’s Electronic Encyclopedia of Communication.

Forum: Qualitative Social Research . . . . . [www.qualitative-research.net](http://www.qualitative-research.net)

An open-access online academic journal of qualitative social research.

HyperRESEARCH . . . . . [www.researchware.com/products/hyperresearch.html](http://www.researchware.com/products/hyperresearch.html)

A qualitative data analysis software package.

NVivo . . . . . [www.qsrinternational.com/products\\_nvivo.aspx](http://www.qsrinternational.com/products_nvivo.aspx)

A qualitative data analysis software package.

Qualitative Research Consultants Association . . . . . [www.qrca.org](http://www.qrca.org)

Links to qualitative research practitioners.

Transana . . . . . [www.transana.org](http://www.transana.org)

Open-source qualitative data analysis software.

University of Surrey, social research update . . . . . <http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/>

A resource for interviewing, focus groups, study design and analysis, and more.

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