# 2

# Strategic Themes in Qualitative Inquiry

Grand strategy should guide tactical decisions. Within a grand strategy all manner of tactical errors may be made, and indeed, are inevitable, but can be corrected as long as the strategic vision remains true and focused. At least that's the theory. In practice . . . ? Try it and see.

—Halcolm

## General Principles

*Strategos* is a Greek word meaning "the thinking and action of a general." What it means to be strategic is epitomized by that greatest of Greek generals, Alexander. He conducted his first independent military operation in northern Macedonia at age 16. He became the ruler of Macedonia after his father, Philip, was assassinated in 336 B.C. Two years later, he embarked on an invasion of Persia and conquest of the known world. In the Battle of Arbela, he decisively defeated Darius III, King of Kings of the Persian Empire, despite being outnumbered 5 to 1 (250,000 Persians against Alexander and fewer than 50,000 Greeks).

Alexander's military conquests are legend. What is less known and little appreciated is that his battlefield victories depended on in-depth knowledge of the

psychology and culture of the ordinary people and military leaders in opposing armies. He included in his military intelligence information about the beliefs, worldview, motivations, and patterns of behavior of those he faced. Moreover, his conquests and subsequent rule were more economic and political in nature than military. He used what we would now understand to be psychological, sociological, and anthropological insights. He understood that lasting victory depended on the goodwill of and alliances with non-Greek peoples. He carefully studied the customs and conditions of people he conquered and adapted his policies—politically, economically, and culturally—to promote good conditions in each locale so that the people were reasonably well-disposed toward his rule (Garcia 1984).

In this approach, Alexander had to overcome the arrogance and ethnocentrism of his own training, culture, and Greek philosophy. Historian C. A. Robinson, Jr. explained that Alexander was brought up in Plato's theory that all non-Greeks were barbarians, enemies of the Greeks by nature, and Aristotle taught that all barbarians (non-Greeks) were slaves by nature. But

> Alexander had been able to test the smugness of the Greeks by actual contact with the barbarians, . . . and experience had apparently convinced him of the essential sameness of all people. (Robinson 1949:136)

In addition to being a great general and enlightened ruler, Alexander appears to have been an extraordinary ethnographer, a qualitative inquirer par excellence, using observations and firsthand experience to systematically study and understand the peoples he encountered and to challenge his own culture's prejudices.

And as Halcolm finished telling the story of Alexander the Great, he reminded those assembled that skills in observation and interviewing are life skills for experiencing the world. "One can say of qualitative inquiry what Marcel Proust said of art, 'Thanks to this, instead of seeing one world, our own, we see it multiplied. So many worlds are at our disposal.' "

—From Halcolm's *Historical Biographies*

## The Purpose of a Strategic Framework

Perception is strong and sight weak. In strategy it is important to see distant things as if they were close and to take a distanced view of close things.

—Miyamoto Musashi (1584-1645),
Japanese warrior, strategist

Don't mistake a clear view for a short distance.

—Grand Canyon hiking advice

Everybody has a plan until they've been hit.

—Old boxing saying

A well-conceived strategy, by providing overall direction, provides a framework for decision making and action. It permits seemingly isolated tasks and activities to fit together, integrating separate efforts toward a common purpose. Specific study design and methods decisions are best made within an overall strategic framework. This chapter offers 12 major themes or principles of qualitative inquiry that, taken together, constiitute a comprehensive and coherent strategic framework for qualitative inquiry, including fundamental assumptions and epistemological ideals. Exhibit 2.1 summarizes those themes in three basic categories: design strategies, data collection and fieldwork strategies, and analysis strategies.

## Design Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry

### Naturalistic Inquiry

An anthropologist studies initiation rites among the Gourma people of Burkina Faso in West Africa. A sociologist observes interactions among bowlers in their weekly league games. An evaluator participates fully in a leadership training program she is documenting. A naturalist studies bighorn sheep beneath Powell Plateau in the Grand Canyon. A policy analyst interviews people living in public housing in their homes. An agronomist observes farmers' spring planting practices in rural Minnesota. What do these researchers have in common? They are in the field studying the real world as it unfolds.

Qualitative designs are naturalistic to the extent that the research takes place in real-world settings and the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest (e.g., a group, event, program, community, relationship, or interaction). The phenomenon of interest unfolds naturally in that it has no predetermined course established by and for the researcher such as would occur in a laboratory or other controlled setting. Observations take place in real-world settings and people are interviewed with open-ended questions in places and under conditions that are comfortable for and familiar to them.

Egon Guba (1978), in his classic treatise on naturalistic inquiry, identified two dimensions along which types of scientific inquiry can be described: (1) the extent to which the scientist manipulates some phenomenon in advance in order to study it and (2) the extent to which constraints are placed on outputs, that is, the extent to which *predetermined* categories or variables are used to describe the phenomenon under study. He then defined "naturalistic inquiry" as a "discovery-oriented" approach that minimizes investigator manipulation of the study setting and places no prior constraints on what the outcomes of the research will be. Naturalistic inquiry contrasts with controlled experimental designs where, ideally, the investigator controls study conditions

**EXHIBIT 2.1 Themes of Qualitative Inquiry**

Design Strategies

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| 1. Naturalistic inquiry | Studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; nonmanipulative and noncontrolling; openness to whatever emerges (lack of predetermined constraints on findings). |
| 2. Emergent design flexibility | Openness to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change; the researcher avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness and pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge. |
| 3. Purposeful sampling | Cases for study (e.g., people, organizations, communities, cultures, events, critical incidences) are selected because they are "information rich" and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling, then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population. |

Data Collection and Fieldwork Strategies

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|---|---|
| 4. Qualitative data | Observations that yield detailed, thick description; inquiry in depth; interviews that capture direct quotations about people's personal perspectives and experiences; case studies; careful document review. |
| 5. Personal experience and engagement | The researcher has direct contact with and gets close to the people, situation, and phenomenon under study; the researcher's personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon. |
| 6. Empathic neutrality and mindfulness | An empathic stance in interviewing seeks vicarious understanding without judgment (neutrality) by showing openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness; in observation it means being fully present (mindfulness). |
| 7. Dynamic systems | Attention to process; assumes change as ongoing whether focus is on an individual, an organization, a community, or an entire culture; therefore, mindful of and attentive to system and situation dynamics. |

by manipulating, changing, or holding constant external influences and where a very limited set of outcome variables is measured. Open- ended, conversation-like interviews as a form of naturalistic inquiry contrast with questionnaires that have predetermined response categories. It's the difference between asking, "Tell me about your experience in the program" and "How satisfied were you? Very, somewhat, little, not at all."

In the simplest form of controlled experimental inquiry, the researcher enters the program at two points in time, pretest and

Analysis Strategies

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| 8. Unique case orientation | Assumes each case is special and unique; the first level of analysis is being true to, respecting, and capturing the details of the individual cases being studied; cross-case analysis follows from and depends on the quality of individual case studies. |
| 9. Inductive analysis and creative synthesis | Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; begins by exploring, then confirming; guided by analytical principles rather than rules; ends with a creative synthesis. |
| 10. Holistic perspective | The whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts; focus on complex interdependencies and system dynamics that cannot meaningfully be reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause-effect relationships. |
| 11. Context sensitivity | Places findings in a social, historical, and temporal context; careful about, even dubious of, the possibility or meaningfulness of generalizations across time and space; emphasizes instead careful comparative case analyses and extrapolating patterns for possible transferability and adaptation in new settings. |
| 12. Voice, perspective, and reflexivity | The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness; complete objectivity being impossible and pure subjectivity undermining credibility, the researcher's focus becomes balance—understanding and depicting the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness. |

posttest, and compares the treatment group to some control group on a limited set of standardized measures. Such designs assume a single, identifiable, isolated, and measurable treatment. Moreover, such designs assume that, once introduced, the treatment remains relatively constant and unchanging.

While there are some narrow, carefully controlled, and standardized treatments that fit this description, in practice human interventions (programs) are often quite comprehensive, variable, and dynamic—

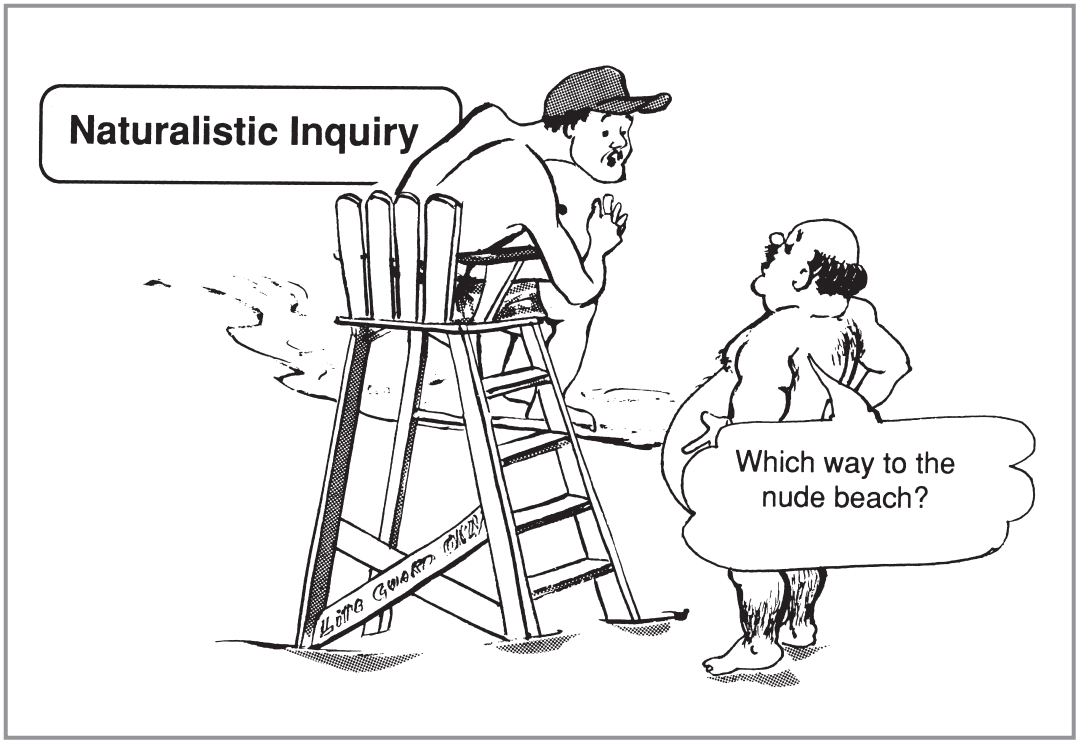
changing as practitioners learn what does and does not work, developing new approaches and realigning priorities. This, of course, creates considerable difficulty for controlled experimental designs that need specifiable, unchanging treatments to relate to specifiable, predetermined outcomes. Controlled experimental evaluation designs work best when it is possible to limit program adaptation and improvement so as not to interfere with the rigor of the research design.

By contrast, under real-world conditions where programs are subject to change and redirection, naturalistic inquiry replaces the fixed treatment/outcome emphasis of the controlled experiment with a dynamic, process orientation that documents actual operations and impacts of a process, program, or intervention over a period of time. The evaluator sets out to understand and document the day-to-day reality of participants in the program, making no attempt to manipulate, control, or eliminate situational variables or program developments, but accepting the complexity of a changing program reality. The data of the evaluation include whatever emerges as important to understanding what participants experience.

*Natural experiments* occur when the observer is present during a real-world change to document a phenomenon before and after the change. Durrenberger and Erem (1999) documented "a natural experiment in thought and structure" when, because of a change at a hospital they were studying, they were able to contrast two different structures of leadership in a union worksite. They had already documented the degree and nature of "union consciousness" before the change, so by repeating their observations after the change in a hospital structure, they were able to take advantage of a naturally occurring experiment. Natural experiments can involve comparing two groups, one of which experiences some change while the other doesn't. What makes this naturalistic inquiry is that real-world participants direct the change, not the researcher, as in the laboratory.

However, the distinction is not as simple as being in the field versus being in the laboratory; rather, the degree to which a design is naturalistic falls along a continuum with completely open fieldwork on one end and completely controlled laboratory control on the other end, but with varying degrees of researcher control and manipulation between these end points. For example, the very presence of the researcher, asking questions, or as in the case of formative program evaluation, providing feedback, can be an intervention that reduces the natural unfolding of events. Unobtrusive observations are needed as an inquiry strategy when the inquirer wants to minimize data collection as an intervention. Nor are laboratory conditions found only in buildings. Field experiments are common in agriculture where researchers want to introduce a considerable amount of control, reduce variation in extraneous variables, and focus on a limited set of predetermined measures, as in crop fertilizer studies.

Let me conclude this discussion of naturalistic inquiry with two examples to illustrate variations in this design strategy. In evaluating a wilderness-based leadership training program, I participated fully in the 10-day wilderness experience, guided in my observations by nothing more than the sensitizing concept "leadership." The only "unnatural" elements of my participation were that (1) everyone knew I was taking notes to document what happened and (2) at the end of each day I conducted open-ended, conversational interviews with staff. While this constitutes a relatively pure naturalistic in-






quiry strategy, my presence, note taking, and interviews must be presumed to have altered somewhat the way the program unfolded. I know, for example, that the debriefing questions I asked staff in the evenings got them thinking about things they were doing that led to some changes along the way in how they conducted the training.

The second example comes from the fieldwork of Beverly Strassmann among the Dogon people in the village of Sangui in the Sahel, about 120 miles south of Tombouctou in Mali, West Africa (Gladwell 2000). Her study focused on the Dogon tradition of having menstruating women stay in small, segregated adobe huts at the edge of the village. She observed the comings and goings of these women and obtained urine samples from them to be sure they were menstruating. The women only slept in the huts. During the day, they went about their normal activities. For 736 consecutive nights, Strassmann kept track of all the women who used the hut. This allowed her to collect statistics on the frequency and length of menstruation among the Dogon women, but with a completely naturalistic inquiry strategy, illustrating how both quantitative and qualitative data can be collected within a naturalistic design strategy. There's no reason to believe that her presence over this long period changed the women's menstruation patterns.

### Emergent Design Flexibility

In the wilderness leadership training program I evaluated, halfway through the 10-day experience the group I was with unexpectedly split into two subgroups. I had to make an in-the-field, on-the-spot decision

about which group to follow and how to get interviews with the others at a later time.

Naturalistic inquiry designs cannot usually be completely specified in advance of fieldwork. While the design will specify an initial focus, plans for observations, and initial guiding interview questions, the naturalistic and inductive nature of the inquiry makes it both impossible and inappropriate to specify operational variables, state testable hypotheses, or finalize either instrumentation or sampling schemes. A naturalistic design unfolds or emerges as fieldwork unfolds.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) made an extensive comparison of the design characteristics of qualitative/naturalistic inquiry in contrast to quantitative/experimental methods. They concluded:

> What these considerations add up to is that the design of a naturalistic inquiry (whether research, evaluation, or policy analysis) *cannot* be given in advance; it must emerge, develop, unfold. . . . The call for an emergent design by naturalists is not simply an effort on their part to get around the "hard thinking" that is supposed to precede an inquiry; the desire to permit events to unfold is not merely a way of rationalizing what is at bottom "sloppy inquiry." The design specifications of the conventional paradigm form a procrustean bed of such a nature as to make it impossible for the naturalist to lie in it—not only uncomfortably, *but at all.* (p. 225)

Design flexibility stems from the open-ended nature of naturalistic inquiry as well as pragmatic considerations. Being open and pragmatic requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty as well as trust in the ultimate value of what inductive analysis will yield. Such tolerance, openness, and trust create special problems for dissertation committees and funders of evaluation or research. How will they know what will result from the inquiry if the design is only partially specified? The answer is: They won't know with any certainty. All they can do is look at the results of similar qualitative inquiries, inspect the reasonableness of the overall strategies in the proposed design, and consider the capacity of the researcher to fruitfully undertake the proposed study.

As with other strategic themes of qualitative inquiry, the extent to which the design is specified in advance is a matter of degree. Doctoral students doing qualitative dissertations will usually be expected to present fairly detailed fieldwork proposals and interview schedules so that the approving doctoral committee can guide the student and be sure that the proposed work will lead to satisfying degree requirements. Many funders will fund only detailed proposals. As an ideal, however, the qualitative researcher needs considerable flexibility and openness. The fieldwork approach of anthropologist Brackette F. Williams represents the ideal of emergence in naturalistic inquiry.

Williams has focused on issues of cultural identity and social relationships. Her work has included in-depth study of ritual and symbolism in the construction of national identity in Guyana (1991), and the ways that race and class function in the national consciousness of the United States. In 1997, she received a five-year MacArthur Fellowship, which has allowed her to pursue a truly emergent, naturalistic design in her current fieldwork on the phenomenon of killing in America. I had the opportunity to interview her about her work and am including several excerpts from that interview[1] throughout this chapter to illustrate actual scholarly implementation of some of the strategic ideals of qualitative inquiry. Here she describes the necessity of an open-ended approach to her fieldwork because her topic is broad and

she needs to follow wherever the phenomenon takes her.

> I'm tracking something—killing—that's moving very rapidly in the culture. Every time I talk to someone, there's another set of data, another thing to look at. Anything that happens in America can be relevant, and that's the exhausting part of it. It never shuts off. You listen to the radio. You watch television. You pass a billboard with an advertisement on it. There's no such thing as something irrelevant when you're studying something like this or maybe just studying the society that you're in. You don't always know exactly how it's going to be relevant, but somehow it just strikes you and you say to yourself: I should document the date of when I saw this and where it was and what was said because it's data.
>
> I don't follow every possible lead people give me. But generally, it is a matter in some sense of opportunity sampling, of serendipity, whatever you want to call it. I key into things that turn out to be very important six months later.
>
> I do impromptu interviews. I don't have some target number of interviews in mind or predetermined questions. It depends on the person and the situation. Airports, for example, are a good place for impromptu interviews with people. So sometimes, instead of using airport time to write, I interview people about the death penalty or about killing or about death in their life. It's called *opportunity sampling.* I begin with a general description. You're such and such an age. You come from such and such a place and, by the way, what do you think about all this killing? And I sort of launch into a conversation. Sometimes the interview goes on for a couple of hours and sometimes, maybe 10 or 15 minutes. I just say, "You wouldn't mind if I record this, would you?" If they say no, I take notes.
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> I did a lot of that kind of impromptu interviewing in the first year to formulate a protocol of questions and issues to pursue. It was general sampling to get a sense of what I wanted to know. At other times, it's just to get a general opinion from John Q. Public about a question that I've gotten all kinds of official responses to, but I want to know what people in general think. In an airport, I may get an opportunity to talk to 5 or 10 people. If I have several stops, I may get 15 or 20 by the time I come home.
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> I fashion the research as I want to fashion it based on what I think this week as opposed to what I thought last week. I don't follow some proposal. I don't have in mind that this has to be a book that's going to have to come out a certain way. I'm following where the data take me, where my questions take me.

Few qualitative studies are as fully emergent and open-ended as the fieldwork of Williams. Her work exemplifies the ideal of *emergent design flexibility.*

## Purposeful Sampling

In 1940, eminent sociologist Kingsley Davis published what was to become a classic case study, the story of Anna, a baby kept in nearly total isolation from the time of her birth until she was discovered at age six. She had been deprived of human contact, had acquired no language skills, and had received only enough care to keep her barely alive. This single case, horrifying as was the abuse and neglect, offered a natural experiment to study socialization effects and the relative contributions of nature and nurture to human development. In 1947, Davis published an update on Anna and a comparison case of socialization isolation, the story of Isabelle. These two cases offered considerable insight into the question of how long a human being could remain isolated before "the capacity for full cultural acquisition" was permanently damaged (Davis 1940,

1947). The cases of Anna and Isabelle are extreme examples of purposeful case sampling.

Unusual clinical cases in medicine and psychology, instructive precisely because they are unusual, offer many examples of purposeful sampling. Neurologist Oliver Sacks (1985) presents a number of such cases in his widely read and influential book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat,* the very title of which hints at the uniqueness of the cases examined. While one cannot generalize from single cases or very small samples, one can learn from them—and learn a great deal, often opening up new territory for further research, as was the case with Piaget's detailed and insightful observations of his own two children.

Perhaps nowhere is the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods better captured than in the different strategies, logics, and purposes that distinguish statistical probability sampling from qualitative purposeful sampling. Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples, even single cases ($N = 1$) such as Anna or Isabelle, selected *purposefully* to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon *in depth.* Quantitative methods typically depend on larger samples selected randomly in order to generalize with confidence from the sample to the population that it represents. Not only are the techniques for sample selection different, but the very logic of each approach is distinct because the purpose of each strategy is different.

The logic and power of probability sampling derive from its purpose: generalization. The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding. This leads to selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term *purposeful* sampling. For example, if the purpose of an evaluation is to increase the effectiveness of a program in reaching lower-socioeconomic groups, one may learn a great deal more by focusing in depth on understanding the needs, interests, and incentives of a small number of carefully selected poor families than by gathering standardized information from a large, statistically significant sample. The cases sampled can be individual people, families, organizations, cultures, incidents, or activities, to mention examples. But regardless of the kind of unit of analysis (e.g., an athlete or a sports team, a teacher or a classroom), the purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study.

Chapter 5 will review several different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases. In my interview with her, Brackette F. Williams offered an example of an information-rich case from her ongoing study of killing in America.

> I've been tracking information on a serial killer—someone who has just been identified as a "serial killer" in Louisiana—who's killing young Black men, shooting them up with drugs and taking one of their tennis shoes, sometimes both. Now, I'm interested in the fact that as society more and more identifies young Black men as sort of the quintessential bad guys, this serial killer picks a bad guy. For contrast, look at serial killers who picked women at a certain period of time, about 15-20 years ago, because they wore, in his estimation, a size 13. Now, track our obsession with obesity. How a serial killer picks his victims can tell you something important about what's going on in society.

## Data Collection and Fieldwork: Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry

### Qualitative Data

Qualitative data consist of quotations, observations, and excerpts from documents. The first chapter provided several examples of qualitative data. Deciding whether to use naturalistic inquiry or an experimental approach is a design issue. This is different from deciding what kind of data to collect (qualitative, quantitative, or some combination), although design and data alternatives are clearly related. Qualitative data can be collected in experimental designs where participants have been randomly divided into treatment and control groups. Likewise, some quantitative data may be collected in naturalistic inquiry approaches. Nevertheless, controlled experimental designs predominantly aim for statistical analyses of quantitative data, while qualitative data are the primary focus in naturalistic inquiry. This relationship between design and measurement will be explored at greater length in the chapter on design.

Qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there. They capture and communicate someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words. Qualitative data tell a story. In the excerpt below, from my interview with her, Williams tells the story of checking out a childhood memory. This story gives us insight into the nature of her naturalistic inquiry and open-ended interviewing, shows how a critical incident can be a purposeful sample, and, in the story itself, offers something of the flavor of qualitative data.

> I was down in Texas interviewing last March, thinking about my research and interviewing people, and there was a childhood memory that I had of an electrocution of a man that was the son of a woman who lived across the field from us. Now a rumor about this had always been in the back of my mind. Whenever I'd hear about a death penalty case over the years, I would think about this man having been electrocuted. I thought he was electrocuted because he raped this White woman. So I'm sitting in my cousin's kitchen after I had done some of these interviews and another woman, an older woman who was a relative of hers, came in and the conversation goes around. I happen to mention this memory of mine. I asked, "Is that just something that I concocted out of having read a book or something, but it never happened?" She answered, "Oh, no, it happened. You only have one part of the story wrong. He didn't rape her. He looked at her."
>
> You know, you read about these things in history books and then all of a sudden, it's like a part of a world that you existed in. These things happened around you and yet somehow there was so much of a distance, you couldn't touch it. I knew about this man all my life, but in all the reading and all the history books, I couldn't touch that. *Doing this project the way I'm doing it allows me to touch things that otherwise I would never touch.*

### Direct Personal Experience and Engagement: Going Into the Field

The preceding quotation from Williams exemplifies the personal nature of qualitative fieldwork. Getting close to her subject matter, including using her own experiences, both from childhood and day-to-day in her adult life, illustrates the all-encompassing and ultimately personal nature of in-depth qualitative inquiry. Traditionally,

social scientists have been warned to stay distant from those they studied to maintain "objectivity." But that kind of detachment can limit one's openness to and understanding of the very nature of what one is studying, especially where meaning-making and emotion are part of the phenomenon. Look closely at what Williams says about the effects of immersing herself personally in her fieldwork, even while visiting relatives: "Doing this project the way I'm doing it allows me to touch things that otherwise I would never touch."

Fieldwork is the central activity of qualitative inquiry. "Going into the field" means having direct and personal contact with people under study in their own environments —getting close to the people and situations being studied to personally understand the realities and minutiae of daily life, for example, life as experienced by participants in a welfare-to-work program. The inquirer gets close to the people under study through physical proximity for a period of time as well as through development of closeness in the social sense of shared experience, empathy, and confidentiality. That many quantitative methodologists fail to ground their findings in personal qualitative understanding poses what sociologist John Lofland (1971) called a major contradiction between their public insistence on the adequacy of statistical portrayals of other humans and their personal everyday dealings with and judgments about other human beings.

> In everyday life, statistical sociologists, like everyone else, assume that they do not know or understand very well people they do not see or associate with very much. They assume that knowing and understanding other people require that one see them reasonably often and in a variety of situations relative to a variety of issues. Moreover, statistical sociologists, like other people, assume that in order to know or understand others one is well-advised to give some conscious attention to that effort in face-to-face contacts. They assume, too, that the internal world of sociology—or any other social world—is not understandable unless one has been part of it in a face-to- face fashion for quite a period of time. How utterly paradoxical, then, for these same persons to turn around and make, by implication, precisely the opposite claim about people they have never encountered face-to-face—those people appearing as numbers in their tables and as correlations in their matrices! (Lofland 1971:3)

Qualitative inquiry means going into the field—into the real world of programs, organizations, neighborhoods, street corners—and getting close enough to the people and circumstances there to capture what is happening. To immerse oneself in naturally occurring complexity involves what qualitative methodologist Norman Denzin (1978a) has called "the studied commitment to actively enter the worlds of interacting individuals" (pp. 8-9). This makes possible description and understanding of *both* externally observable behaviors *and* internal states (worldview, opinions, values, attitudes, and symbolic constructs). Given the qualitative emphasis on striving for depth of understanding, in context, attitude surveys and psychological tests are inadequate for revealing inner perspectives. "The inner perspective assumes that understanding can only be achieved by actively participating in the life of the observed and gaining insight by means of introspection" (Bruyn 1963:226).

Actively participating in the life of the observed means going where the action is, getting one's hands dirty, participating where possible in actual program activities, and getting to know program staff and participants on a personal level—in other words,

getting personally engaged so as to use all of one's senses and capacities, including the capacity to experience affect no less than cognition. Such engagement stands in sharp contrast to the professional comportment of some in the field, for example, supposedly objective evaluators, who purposely project an image of being cool, calm, external, and detached. Such detachment is presumed to reduce bias. However, qualitative methodologists question the necessity and utility of distance and detachment, asserting that without empathy and sympathetic introspection derived from personal encounters, the observer cannot fully understand human behavior. Understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person's shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, and feel.

In a classic study, educational evaluator Edna Shapiro (1973) studied young children in classrooms in the national Follow Through program using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was her closeness to the children in those classrooms that allowed her to see that something was happening that was not captured by standardized tests. She could see differences in children, observe their responses to diverse situations, and capture the varying meanings they attached to common events. She could feel their tension in the testing situation and their spontaneity in the more natural classroom setting. Had she worked solely with data collected by others or only at a distance, she would never have discovered the crucial differences in the classroom settings she studied—differences that actually allowed her to evaluate the innovative program in a meaningful and relevant way. Where standardized tests showed no differences between classrooms using different approaches, her direct observations documented important and significant program impacts.

It is important to note that the admonition to get close to the data is in no way meant to deny the usefulness of quantitative methods. Rather, it means that statistical portrayals must always be interpreted and given human meaning. I once interviewed an evaluator of federal health programs who expressed frustration at trying to make sense out of statistical data from over 80 projects after site visit funds had been cut out of the evaluation: "There's no way to evaluate something that's just data. You know, you have to go look."

Going into the field and having personal contact with program participants is not the only legitimate way to understand human behavior. For certain questions and for situations involving large groups, distance is inevitable, perhaps even helpful, but to get at deeper meanings and preserve context, face-to-face interaction is both necessary and desirable. This returns us to a recurrent theme of this book: matching research methods to the purpose of a study, the questions being asked, and the resources available.

In thinking about the issue of closeness to the people and situations being studied, it is useful to remember that many major contributions to our understanding of the world have come from scientists' personal experiences. One finds many instances where closeness to sources of data made key insights possible— Piaget's closeness to his children, Freud's proximity to and empathy with his patients, Darwin's closeness to nature, and even Newton's intimate encounter with an apple. In short, closeness does not make bias and loss of perspective inevitable; distance is no guarantee of objectivity.

### Empathic Neutrality

If, as the previous section has discussed, naturalistic inquiry involves fieldwork that puts one in close contact with people and

their problems, what is to be the researcher's cognitive and emotional stance toward those people and problems? No universal prescription can capture the range of possibilities, for the answer will depend on the situation, the nature of the inquiry, and the perspective of the researcher. But thinking strategically, I offer the phrase "empathic neutrality" as a point of departure. It suggests that there is a middle ground between becoming too involved, which can cloud judgment, and remaining too distant, which can reduce understanding. What is empathic neutrality? Consider this anecdote by way of illustration.

Pragmatist philosopher William James, also a scholar of anatomy and psychology, had a great capacity for empathy, as displayed in his classic study *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] 1999). Editor Clifton Fadiman (1985:305) recounts that while he was teaching at Radcliffe, Gertrude Stein took a course from him in which, having attended the opera and then partied into the wee hours the night before an exam, she wrote, "Dear Professor James, I am so sorry but I do not feel a bit like writing an examination paper today." James is said to have written back: "Dear Miss Stein, I understand perfectly. I often feel like that myself." Had he added, but the exam is still due, instead of ordinary sympathy he would have displayed extraordinary empathic neutrality.

Methodologists and philosophers of science debate what the researcher's stance should be vis-à-vis the people being studied. Critics of qualitative inquiry have charged that the approach is too *subjective,* in large part because the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation and because a qualitative strategy includes having personal contact with and getting close to the people and situation under study. From the perspective of advocates of a supposedly value-free social science, subjectivity is the very antithesis of scientific inquiry.

Objectivity has been considered the strength of the scientific method. The primary methods for achieving objectivity in science have been conducting blind experiments and quantification. "Objective tests" gather data through instruments that, in principle, are not dependent on human skill, perception, or even presence. Yet, it is clear that tests and questionnaires are designed by human beings and therefore are subject to the intrusion of the researcher's biases by the very questions asked. Unconscious bias in the skillful manipulation of statistics to prove a hypothesis in which the researcher believes is hardly absent from hypothetical-deductive inquiry.

Part of the difficulty in thinking about the fieldwork stance of the qualitative inquirer is that the terms *objectivity* and *subjectivity* have become so loaded with negative connotations and subject to acrimonious debate (e.g., Scriven 1972a; Borman and Goetz 1986; Krenz and Sax 1986; Guba 1991) that neither term any longer provides useful guidance. These terms have been politicized beyond utility. To claim the mantle of "objectivity" in the postmodern age is to expose oneself as embarrassingly naive. The ideals of absolute objectivity and value-free science are impossible to attain in practice and are of questionable desirability in the first place since they ignore the intrinsically social nature and human purposes of research. On the other hand, *subjectivity* has such negative connotations in the public mind that to admit being subjective may undermine one's credibility with audiences unsophisticated about phenomenological assumptions and nuances. In short, the terms *objectivity* and *subjectivity* have become ideological ammunition in the methodological paradigms

debate. My pragmatic solution is to avoid using either word and to stay out of futile debates about subjectivity versus objectivity. Qualitative research in recent years has moved toward preferring such language as *trustworthiness* and *authenticity.* Evaluators aim for "balance," "fairness," and "completeness" (Patton 1997a:282). Chapter 9 will discuss these terms and the stances they imply at greater length. At this point, I simply want to note the strategic nature of the issue of inquirer stance and add empathic neutrality to the emerging lexicon that attempts to supersede the hot button term *objective* and the epithet *subjective.*

Any research strategy ultimately needs credibility to be useful. No credible research strategy advocates biased distortion of data to serve the researcher's vested interests and prejudices. Both qualitative/naturalistic inquiry and quantitative/experimental inquiry seek honest, meaningful, credible, and empirically supported findings. Any credible research strategy requires that the investigator adopt a stance of *neutrality* with regard to the phenomenon under study. This simply means that the investigator does not set out to prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths. The neutral investigator enters the research arena with no ax to grind, no theory to prove (to test but not to prove), and no predetermined results to support. Rather, the investigator's commitment is to understand the world as it unfolds, be true to complexities and multiple perspectives as they emerge, and be balanced in reporting both confirmatory and disconfirming evidence with regard to any conclusions offered.

Neutrality is not an easily attainable stance, so all credible research strategies include techniques for helping the investigator become aware of and deal with selective perception, personal biases, and theoretical predispositions. Qualitative inquiry, because the human being is the instrument of data collection, requires that the investigator carefully reflect on, deal with, and report potential sources of bias and error. Systematic data collection procedures, rigorous training, multiple data sources, triangulation, external reviews, and other techniques to be discussed in this book are aimed at producing high-quality qualitative data that are credible, trustworthy, authentic, balanced about the phenomenon under study, and fair to the people studied.

The livelihood of evaluators and researchers depends on their integrity and credibility. Independence and neutrality, then, are serious issues.

However, neutrality does not mean detachment. It is on this point that qualitative inquiry makes a special contribution. Qualitative inquiry depends on, uses, and enhances the researcher's direct experiences in the world and insights about those experiences. This includes learning through *empathy.*

## Empathy and Insight

> The idea of acquiring an "inside" understanding—the actors' definitions of the situation—is a powerful central concept for understanding the purpose of qualitative inquiry.
>
> —Thomas A. Schwandt (2000:102)

Empathy develops from personal contact with the people interviewed and observed during fieldwork. Empathy involves being able to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others. Put metaphorically, empathy is "like being able to imagine a life for a spider, a maker's life, or just some aliveness in its wide abdomen and delicate spinnerets so you take it outside in two paper cups instead of stepping on it" (Dunn 2000:62). Empathy combines cognitive understanding with affective connection, and in that sense differs from sympathy, which is primarily emotional (Wispé 1986).

The value of empathy is emphasized in the phenomenological doctrine of *Verstehen* that undergirds much qualitative inquiry. *Verstehen* means "understanding" and refers to the unique human capacity to make sense of the world. This capacity has profound implications for how one studies human beings. The *Verstehen* doctrine presumes that since human beings have a unique type of consciousness, as distinct from other forms of life, the study of human beings will be different from the study of other forms of life and nonhuman phenomena. The capacity for empathy, then, is one of the major assets available for human inquiry into human affairs.

The *Verstehen* premise asserts that human beings can and must be understood in a manner different from other objects of study because humans have purposes and emotions; they make plans, construct cultures, and hold values that affect behavior. Their feelings and behaviors are influenced by consciousness, deliberation, and the capacity to think about the future. Human beings live in a world that has special meaning to them, and because their behavior has meaning, "human actions are intelligible in ways that the behavior of nonhuman objects is not" (Strike 1972:28). Human and social sciences need methods different from those used in agricultural experimentation and physical sciences because human beings are different from plants and nuclear particles. The *Verstehen* tradition stresses understanding that focuses on the meaning of human behavior, the context of social interaction, an empathic understanding based on personal experience, and the connections between mental states and behavior. The tradition of *Verstehen* places emphasis on the human capacity to know and understand others through empathic introspection and reflection based on direct observation of and interaction with people. "*Verstehen* thus entails a kind of empathic identification with the actor. It is an act of psychological reenactment— getting inside the head of an actor to understand what he or she is up to in terms of motives, beliefs, desires, thoughts, and so on" (Schwandt 2000:192).

Max Weber brought the term *empathy* into social science to emphasize the importance of comprehending the motives and feelings of people in a social-cultural context.

### *VERSTEHEN?*

*The following story is passed around among management consultants. It seems that very late at night the president of a multinational corporation was standing in front of a paper shredder, trying to figure out how to turn it on. The building was deserted except for the cleaning staff, one of whom happened by. The president asked for help, explaining that what he was working on was very important and couldn't wait until morning. The cleaning person was glad to be of help, turned on the machine, took the sheet of paper from the president, and fed it into the shredder just as the president said, "I only need you to make one copy."*

> Both *Verstehen* and empathy depend largely on qualitative data. Verstehen is an attempt to "crack the code" of the culture, that is, detect the categories into which a culture codes actions and thoughts. . . . Empathy in evaluation is the detection of emotions manifested in the program participants and staff, achieved by evaluators' becoming aware of similar or complementary emotions in themselves. (Meyers 1981:180)

A qualitative strategy of inquiry proposes an active, involved role for the social scientist. "Hence, insight may be regarded as the core of social knowledge. It is arrived at by being on the inside of the phenomena to be observed. . . . It is participation in an activity that generates interest, purpose, point of view, value, meaning, and intelligibility, as well as bias" (Wirth 1949:xxii). This is a quite different scientific process from that envisioned by the classical, experimental approach to science, but it is still an empirical, (i.e., data-based), scientific perspective. The qualitative perspective "in no way suggests that the researcher lacks the ability to be scientific while collecting the data. On the contrary, it merely specifies that it is crucial for validity—and, consequently, for reliability—to try to picture the empirical social world as it actually exists to those under investigation, rather than as the researcher imagines it to be" (Filstead 1970:4), thus the importance of such qualitative approaches as participant observation, depth interviewing, detailed description, and case studies.

These qualitative inquiry methods provide opportunities to achieve empathy and give the researcher an empirical basis for describing the perspectives of others. Chapter 1 cited the framework of humanistic psychologist Clark Moustakas, who has described this nonjudgmental empathic stance as "Being-In" another's world—immersing oneself in another's world by listening deeply and attentively so as to enter into the other person's experience and perception.

> I do not select, interpret, advise, or direct. . . . Being-In the world of the other is a way of going wide open, entering in as if for the first time, hearing just what is, leaving out my own thoughts, feelings, theories, biases. . . . I enter with the intention of understanding and accepting perceptions and not presenting my own view or reactions. . . . I only want to encourage and support the other person's expression, what and how it is, how it came to be, and where it is going. (Moustakas 1995:82-83)

At first, the phrase "empathic neutrality" may appear to be an oxymoron, combining contradictory ideas. Empathy, however, describes a stance toward the people one encounters—it communicates understanding, interest, and caring. Neutrality suggests a stance toward their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors—it means being nonjudgmental. Neutrality can actually facilitate rapport and help build a relationship that supports empathy by disciplining the researcher to be open to the other person and nonjudgmental in that openness. Rapport and empathy, however, must not be taken for granted, as Radhika Parameswaran (2001) found in doing fieldwork among young middle-class women in urban India who read Western romance fiction.

> Despite their eventual willingness to share their fears and complaints about gendered social pressures, I still wonder whether these young women would have been more open about their sexuality with a Westerner who might be seen as less likely to judge them based on cultural expectations of women's behavior in Indian society. The well-known word rapport, which is often used to signify acceptance and warm relationships between informants and researchers, was thus some-

> thing I could not take for granted despite being an insider; all I could claim was an imperfect rapport. (Parameswaran 2001:69)

Evaluation presents special challenges for rapport and neutrality as well. After fieldwork, an evaluator may be called on to render judgments about a program as part of data interpretation and formulating recommendations, but during fieldwork, the focus should be on rigorously observing and interviewing to understand the people and situation being studied. This nuanced relationship between neutrality and empathy will be discussed further in both the data collection and analysis chapters.

## A Dynamic, Developmental Perspective

There is nothing permanent except change.

—Heraclitus (Ancient Greece)

A questionnaire is like a photograph. A qualitative study is like a documentary film. Both offer images. One, however— the photograph—captures and freezes a moment in time, like recording a respondent's answer to a survey question at a moment in time. The other—the film— offers a fluid sense of development, movement, and change.

Qualitative evaluation researchers, for example, conceive of programs as dynamic and developing, with "treatments" changing in subtle but important ways as staff learns what does and doesn't work, as clients move in and out, and as conditions of delivery are altered. A primary challenge, then, becomes describing and understanding these dynamic program processes and their holistic effects on participants so as to provide information for program improvement. In contrast, an experimental design for an evaluation typically conceives of the program as a fixed thing, like a measured amount of fertilizer applied to a crop—*a* treatment, *an* intervention—that has predetermined, measurable outcomes. Inconsistency in the treatment, instability in the intervention, changes in the program, variability in program processes, and diversity in participants' experiences undermine the logic of an experimental design because these developments—all natural, even inevitable, in real-world programs—call into question what the "treatment" or experiment actually is.

Naturalistic inquiry assumes the ever-changing world posited by the observation in the ancient Chinese proverb that one never steps into the same river twice. Change is a natural, expected, and inevitable part of human experience, and documenting change is a natural, expected, and intrinsic part of fieldwork. Rather than trying to control, limit, or direct change, naturalistic inquirers expect change, anticipate the likelihood of the unanticipated, and are prepared to go with the flow of change. One gets this sense of pursuing change in the comment by anthropologist Williams cited earlier: "I'm tracking something—killing —that's moving very rapidly in the culture." Part of her inquiry task is to track cultural changes the way an epidemiologist tracks a disease. As a result, reading a good qualitative case study gives the sense of reading a good story. It has a beginning, a middle, and an ending—though not necessarily an end.

## Analysis Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry

### Unique Case Orientation

"Six windows on respect" is how Harvard sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2000:13) describes the six detailed case studies, each a full chapter, she presents in her book *Respect.* The cases offer different angles on the meaning and experience of respect in modern society as illuminated by a nurse-midwife, a pediatrician, a teacher, an artist, a law school professor, and a pastoral therapist/AIDS activist. Before drawing themes and contrasts from this small, purposeful sample, and before naming the six angles they represent, Lawrence-Lightfoot had the task of constructing the unique cases to tell these distinct stories. Her first task, then, was to undertake the "art and science of portraiture" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 1997). From these separate portraits, she fashions a stained glass mosaic that depicts and illuminates *Respect.*

I undertook a study of a national fellowship award program that had had more than 600 recipients over a 20-year period. A survey had been done to get the fellows' opinions about select issues, but the staff wanted more depth, richness, and detail to really understand patterns of fellowship use and impact. With a team of researchers, we conducted 40 in-depth, face-to-face interviews and wrote case studies. Through inductive analysis, we subsequently identified distinct enabling processes and impacts, and we created a framework that depicted relationships between status at the time of the award, enabling processes, and impacts. The heart of the study remained the 40 case studies. To read only the framework analysis without reading the case studies would be to lose much of the richness, depth, meaning, and contribution of qualitative research and evaluation. That is what is meant by the "unique case orientation" of qualitative inquiry.

Case studies are particularly valuable in program evaluation when the program is individualized, so the evaluation needs to be attentive to and capture individual differences among participants, diverse experiences of the program, or unique variations from one program setting to another. As noted earlier, a case can be a person, an event, a program, an organization, a time period, a critical incident, or a community. Regardless of the unit of analysis, a qualitative case study seeks to describe that unit in depth and detail, holistically, and in context.

### Inductive Analysis and Creative Synthesis

Benjamin Whorf's development of the famous Whorf hypothesis—that language shapes our experience of the environment and that words shape perceptions and actions, a kind of linguistic relativity theory (Schultz 1991)—provides an instructive example of inductive analysis. Whorf was an insurance investigator assigned to look into explosions in warehouses. He discovered that truck drivers were entering "empty" warehouses smoking cigarettes and cigars. The warehouses, it turned out, often contained invisible, but highly flammable gases. He interviewed truckers and found that they associated the word *empty* with *harmless* and acted accordingly. From these specific observations and findings, he *inductively* formulated his general theory about language and perception that has informed a half-century of communications scholarship (Lee 1996).

Qualitative inquiry is particularly oriented toward exploration, discovery, and inductive logic. Inductive analysis begins with

## QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

*Understanding unique cases can be deepened by comparative analysis. Indeed, constant comparative analysis is a central analytical approach in grounded theory, one of the major schools of qualitative inquiry (discussed in Chapters 3 and 8). Comparisons can also be important in illuminating differences between programs in evaluation. Indeed, evaluation theorist Michael Scriven (1993) has asserted in his monograph* Hard-Won Lessons in Program Evaluation *that "noncomparative evaluations are comparatively useless" (p. 58).*

*Leonardo da Vinci's (ca. 1519) insight into color contrasts offers a metaphor for qualitative comparative analysis: "In order to attain a color of the greatest possible perfection, one has to place it in the neighborhood of the directly contrary color: thus one places black with white, yellow with blue, green with red" (cited in Boring 1942).*

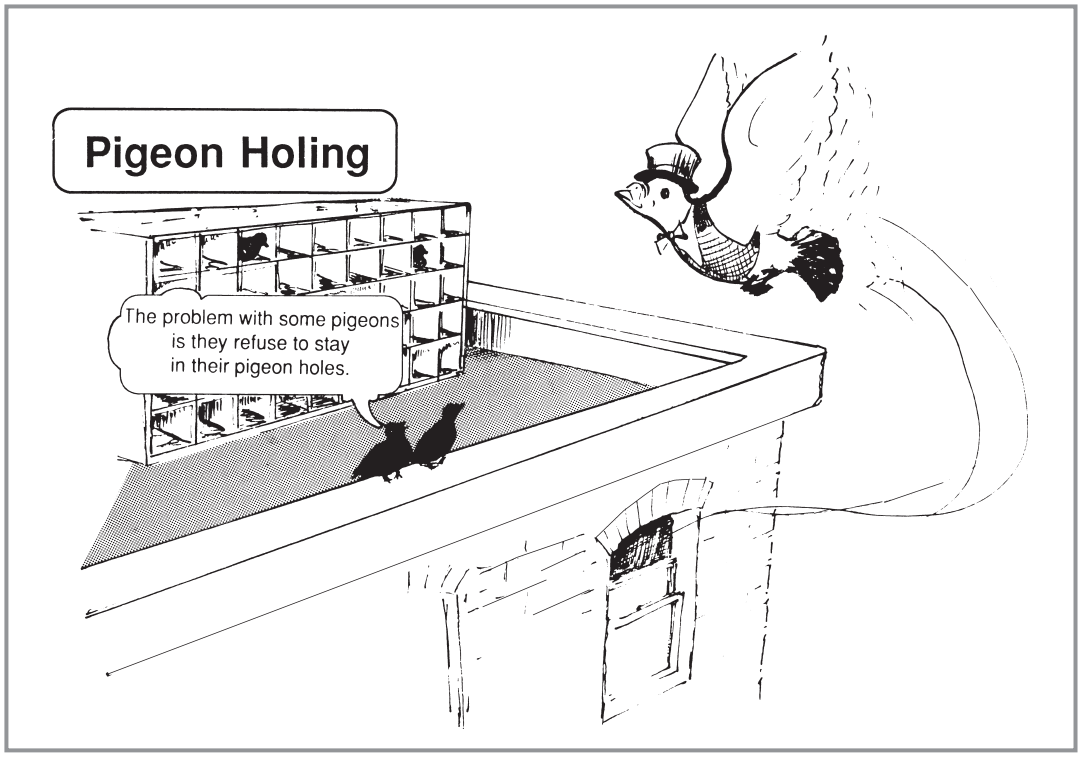
specific observations and builds toward general patterns. Categories or dimensions of analysis emerge from open-ended observations as the inquirer comes to understand patterns that exist in the phenomenon being investigated.

Inductive analysis contrasts with the hypothetical-deductive approach of experimental designs that require the specification of main variables and the statement of specific research hypotheses *before* data collection begins. A specification of research hypotheses based on an explicit theoretical framework means that general constructs provide the framework for understanding specific observations or cases. The investigator must then decide in advance what variables are important and what relationships among those variables can be expected.

The strategy of inductive designs is to allow the important analysis dimensions to emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be. The qualitative analyst seeks to understand the multiple interrelationships among dimensions that emerge from the data without making prior assumptions or specifying hypotheses about the linear or correlative relationships among narrowly defined, operationalized variables. For example, an inductive approach to program evaluation means that understanding the nature of the "intervention" emerges from direct observations of program activities and interviews with participants. In general, theories about what is happening in a setting are grounded in and emerge from direct field experience rather than being imposed a priori as is the case in formal hypothesis and theory testing.

The straightforward contrast between closed-ended questionnaires and open-ended interviews in Chapter 1 illustrated the difference between deductive and inductive approaches at the simplest level. A structured, multiple-choice questionnaire requires a deductive approach because items must be predetermined based on some theory or preordinate criteria, for example, program goals about what is important to measure. An open-ended interview, by way of contrast, permits the respondent to describe what is meaningful and salient without being *pigeon holed* into standardized categories.

In practice, these approaches are often combined. Some evaluation or research questions may be determined deductively, while others are left sufficiently open to permit inductive analyses based on direct observations. While the quantitative/experimental approach is largely hypothetical-






deductive and the qualitative/naturalistic approach is largely inductive, a study can include elements of both strategies. Indeed, over a period of inquiry, an investigation may flow from inductive approaches, to find out what the important questions and variables are (exploratory work), to deductive hypothesis-testing or outcome measurement aimed at confirming and/or generalizing exploratory findings, then back again to inductive analysis to look for rival hypotheses and unanticipated or unmeasured factors.

The precise nature of inductive analysis depends, in part, on the purpose of the analysis and the number and types of cases in a study. Where there are several cases to be compared and contrasted, an inductive approach begins by constructing individual cases, without pigeon holing or categorizing those cases. That is, the first task is to do a careful job independently writing up the separate cases. Once that is done, cross-case analysis can begin in search of patterns and themes that cut across individual experiences. The initial focus is on full understanding of individual cases before those unique cases are combined or aggregated thematically. This helps ensure that emergent categories and discovered patterns are *grounded* in specific cases and their contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Just as writers report different creative processes, so too qualitative analysts have different ways of working. Although software programs now exist to facilitate working with large amounts of narrative data and substantial guidance can be offered about the steps and processes of content analysis, making sense of multiple interview transcripts and pages of field notes cannot be reduced to a formula or even a standard series of steps. There is no equivalent of a statistical significance test or factor score to tell the an-

alyst when results are important or what quotations fit together under the same theme. Finding a way to *creatively synthesize* and present findings is one of the challenges of qualitative analysis, a challenge that will be explored at length in Part 3 of this book. For the moment, I can offer a flavor of that challenge with another excerpt from my interview with anthropologist Williams. Here she describes part of her own unique analytic process.

> My current project follows up work that I have always done, which is to study categories and classifications and their implications. Right now, as I said, the focus of my work is on killing and the desire to kill and the categories people create in relation to killing. Part of it right now focuses on the death penalty, but mainly on killing. My fascination is with the links between category distinctions, commitments, and the desire to kill for those commitments. That's what I study.
>
> I track categories, like "serial killers" or "death row inmates." The business of constantly transforming people into acts and acts into people is part of the way loyalties, commitments, and hatreds are generated. So I'm a classifier. I study classification—theories of classification. A lot of categories have to do with very abstract things; others have to do with very concrete things like skin color. But ultimately, the classification of a kill is what I'm focusing on now. I've been asking myself lately, for the chapter I've been working on, "Is there a fundamental difference, for example, in the way we classify to kill?" Consider the percentage of people classified as "death worthy"—the way we classify to justify the death penalty.
>
> As I write, moving back and forth between my tapes and my interviews, I don't feel that I have to follow some fixed outline or that I have to code things to come out a certain way. Sometimes I listen to a tape and I start to think that I should rewrite this part of this chapter. I had completely forgotten about this tape. It was done in early '98 or late '97 and maybe I hadn't listened to it or looked at the transcript for a while, and I've just finished a chapter or section of a chapter. I pull that tape off the shelf. I listen to it. I go back to the transcript and I start writing again. I start revising in ways that it seems to me that tape *demands.*

As Williams describes her analysis and writing process, she offers insight into what it means when qualitative researchers say they are "working to be true to the data" or that their analytical process is "data driven." Williams says, "I start revising in ways that it seems to me that tape *demands*." It is common to hear qualitative analysts say that, as they write their conclusions, they keep going back to the cases; they reread field notes; and they listen again to interviews. Inductive analysis is built on a solid foundation of specific, concrete, and detailed observations, quotations, documents, and cases. As thematic structures and overarching constructs emerge during analysis, the qualitative analyst keeps returning to fieldwork observations and interview transcripts, working from the bottom up, staying grounded in the foundation of case write-ups, and thereby examining emergent themes and constructs in light of what they illuminate about the case descriptions on which they are based. That is inductive analysis.

## Holistic Perspective

Holography is a method of photography in which the wave field of light scattered by an object is captured as an interference pattern. When the photographic record—the hologram—is illuminated by a laser, a three-dimensional image appears. Any piece of a hologram will reconstruct the entire image.

This has become a metaphor for thinking in new ways about the relationships between parts and wholes. The interdependence of flora, fauna, and the physical environment in ecological systems offers another metaphor for what it means to think and analyze holistically.

Researchers and evaluators analyzing qualitative data strive to understand a phenomenon or program as a whole. This means that a description and interpretation of a person's social environment, or an organization's external context, is essential for overall understanding of what has been observed during fieldwork or said in an interview. This holistic approach assumes that the whole is understood as a complex system that is greater than the sum of its parts. The analyst searches for the totality or unifying nature of particular settings—the *gestalt.* Psychotherapist Fritz Perls (1973) made the term *gestalt* equivalent with a holistic perspective in psychology. He used the example of three sticks that are just three sticks until one places them together to form a triangle. Then they are much more than the three separate sticks combined: They form a new whole.

> A gestalt may be a tangible thing, such as a triangle, or it may be a situation. A happening such as a meeting of two people, their conversation, and their leave-taking would constitute a completed situation. If there were an interruption in the middle of the conversation, it would be an incomplete gestalt. (Brown 1996:36)

The strategy of seeking gestalt units and holistic understandings in qualitative analysis contrasts with the logic and procedures of evaluation studies conducted in the analytical tradition of "let's take it apart and see how it works." The quantitative-experimental approach to evaluation, for example, requires operationalization of independent and dependent variables with a focus on their statistical covariance. Outcomes must be identified and measured as specific variables. Treatments and programs must also be conceptualized as discrete, independent variables. The characteristics of program participants are also described by standardized, quantified dimensions. Sometimes the variables of interest are derived from program goals, for example, student achievement test scores, recidivism statistics for a group of juvenile delinquents, sobriety rates for participants in chemical dependency treatment programs. At other times, the variables measured are indicators of a larger construct. For example, community well-being may be measured by such rates for delinquency, infant mortality, divorce, unemployment, suicide, and poverty (Brock, Schwaller, and Smith 1985). These variables are statistically manipulated or added together in some linear fashion to test hypotheses and draw inferences about the relationships among separate indicators, or the statistical significance of differences between measured levels of the variables for different groups. The essential logic of this approach is as follows: (1) Key program outcomes and processes can be represented by separate independent variables, (2) these variables can be quantified, and (3) relationships among these variables are best portrayed statistically.

The primary critique of this logic by qualitative-naturalistic evaluators is that such an approach (1) oversimplifies the complexities of real-world programs and participants' experiences, (2) misses major factors of importance that are not easily quantified, and (3) fails to portray a sense of the program and its impacts as a whole. To support holistic analysis, the qualitative inquirer gathers data on multiple aspects of the setting under study to assemble a comprehensive and complete

## HOLISTIC UNDERSTANDING IN GENETICS

*The work of geneticist Barbara McClintock, winner of the Nobel prize, illustrates holistic inquiry. She sought to understand the organization and functions of genes in relation to the rest of the cell, within the organism as a whole:*

> *She sought a feel for the whole. Rather than dismissing exceptional cases as irrelevant to general theory, she focused on anomalous pigmentation of individual plants. Instead of starting with an hypothesis prescribing what she expected and framing the questions for the material to answer, as in most controlled experiments, she felt the need to "let the experiment tell you what it wants to do" and to "listen to the material."*
>
> *She followed each unique seedling through its life in the field. . . . At times, she became so engrossed in examining individual cells in a grain of corn through her microscope that she felt as if she were down there within the cell, the same size as the chromosomes, and could see how they were interacting. In such ways, she developed what she called a "feeling for the organism."*
>
> *Her unique understanding let her to question the genetic theory of Watson and Crick: that DNA contained a cell's vital information, which was copied onto the RNA and acted as a blueprint for genetic traits. She thought that this "master molecule theory" claimed to explain too much and did not acknowledge the differences between small simple organisms and large complex multicellular ones. More important, it treated DNA as a central autonomous actor, sending out information one way, through a genetic organization structure hierarchically, like a classic bureaucracy. McClintock showed that genetic organization is more complex and interdependent. The DNA itself adapts to outside factors and can be reprogrammed by signals from the environment to meet the survival needs of the organism. In essence, information flows both ways. (Schmidt 1993: 528)*

picture of the social dynamic of the particular situation or program. This means that at the time of data collection, each case, event, or setting under study, though treated as a unique entity with its own particular meaning and its own constellation of relationships emerging from and related to the context within which it occurs, is also thought of as a window into the whole. Thus capturing and documenting history, interconnections, and system relationships are part of fieldwork.

The advantages of using quantitative variables and indicators are parsimony, precision, and ease of analysis. Where key elements can be quantified with validity, reliability, and credibility, and where necessary statistical assumptions can be met (e.g., linearity, normality, and independence of measurement), then statistical portrayals can be quite powerful and succinct. The advantages of qualitative portrayals of holistic settings and impacts are that greater attention can be given to nuance, setting, interdependencies, complexities, idiosyncrasies, and context. John Dewey (1956) articulated what a holistic approach means for both teaching and research if one wants to gain insight into and understand the world of the child:

> The child's life is an integral, a total one. He passes quickly and readily from one topic to another, as from one spot to another, but is not conscious of transition or break. There is no conscious isolation, hardly conscious distinction. The things that occupy him are held together by the unity of the personal and social interests which his life carries along. . . . [His]

> universe is fluid and fluent; its contents dissolve and reform with amazing rapidity. But after all, it is the child's own world. It has the unity and completeness of his own life. (pp. 5-6)

Qualitative sociologist Irwin Deutscher (1970) commented that despite the totality of our personal experiences as living, working human beings, social scientists have tended to focus their research on parts to the virtual exclusion of wholes:

> We knew that human behavior was rarely if ever directly influenced or explained by an isolated variable; we knew that it was impossible to assume that any set of such variables was additive (with or without weighting); we knew that the complex mathematics of the interaction among any set of variables was incomprehensible to us. In effect, although we knew they did not exist, we defined them into being. (p. 33)

While many would view this intense critique of variable analysis as too extreme, the reaction of many program staff to scientific research is like the reaction of Copernicus to the astronomers of his day: "With them," he observed, "it is as though an artist were to gather the hands, feet, head, and other members for his images from diverse models, each part excellently drawn, but not related to a single body, and since they in no way match each other, the result would be monster rather than man" (from Kuhn 1970:83). How many program staffs have complained of the evaluation research monster?

It is no simple task to undertake holistic analysis. The challenge is "to seek the essence of the life of the observed, to sum up, to find a central unifying principle" (Bruyn 1966:316). Again, Shapiro's (1973) work in evaluating innovative Follow Through classrooms is instructive. She found that standardized test results could not be interpreted without understanding the larger cultural and institutional context in which the individual child is situated. Taking context seriously, the topic of the next section, is an important element of holistic analysis.

An illuminative example of holistic thinking came to me from a Portuguese colleague. He told of driving in a remote area of his country when he came upon a sizable herd of sheep being driven along the road by a shepherd. Seeing that he would be delayed until the sheep could be turned off the road, he got out of the car and struck up a conversation with the shepherd.

"How many sheep do you have?" he asked.

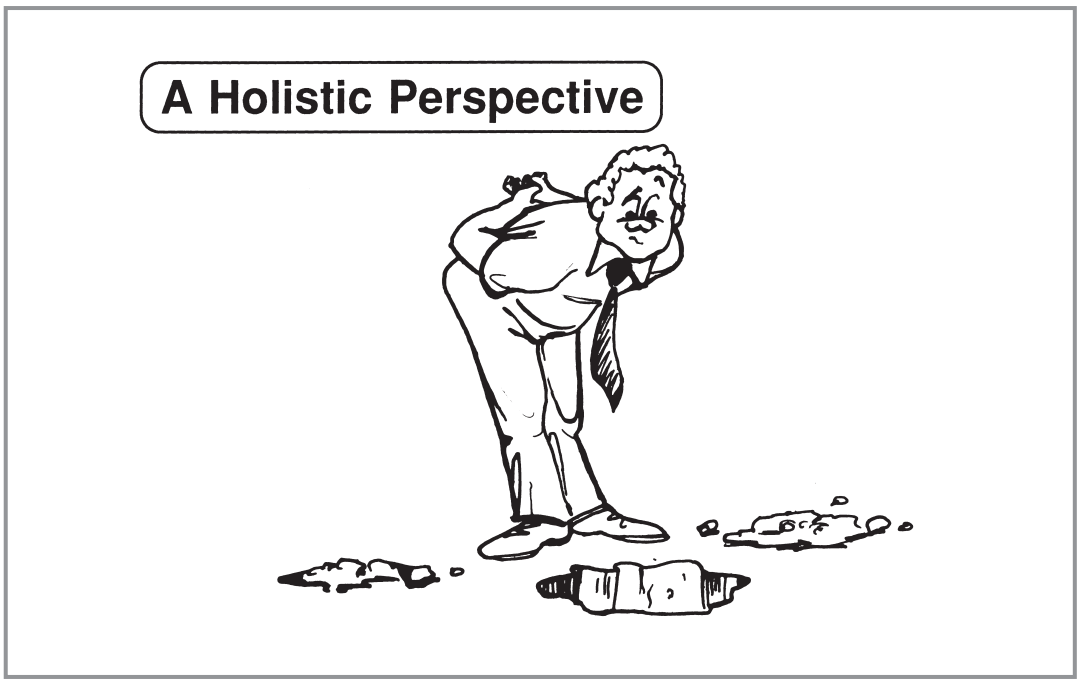
"I don't know," responded the young man.

Surprised at this answer, the traveler asked, "How do you keep track of the flock if you don't know how many sheep there are? How would you know if one was missing?"

The shepherd seemed puzzled by the question. Then he explained, "I don't need to count them. I know each one and I know the whole flock. I would know if the flock was not whole."

## Context Sensitivity

> Any single act from any single person, put out of context, is damnable.
>
> —Actor Kevin Spacey accepting the 2000 Academy Award for Best Performance by an Actor in the film *American Beauty,* explaining the film's message






Let's move, now, from sheep to elephants. One of the classic tales used to illustrate the relationship between parts and wholes is the story of the nine blind people and the elephant. Each person touches only one part of the elephant and therefore knows only that part. The person touching the ears thinks an elephant is like a large, thin fan. The person touching the tail thinks the elephant is like a rope. The person touching the truck thinks of a snake. The legs feel like tree trunks, the elephant's side like a tall wall. And so it goes. The holistic point is that one must put all of these perspectives together to get a full picture of what an elephant actually looks like.

But such a picture will still be limited, even distorted, if the only place one sees the elephant is in the zoo or at the circus. To understand the elephant—how it developed, how it uses its trunk, why it is so large—one must see it on the African savanna or in the Asian jungle. In short, one must see it *in context* and as part of an ecological *system* in relation to other flora and fauna, in its natural environment.

When we say to someone, "You've taken my comment out of context," we are saying, *You have distorted what I said,* changed its meaning by omitting critical context.

In Victor Hugo's great classic *Les Misérables,* we first encounter Jean Valjean as a hardened criminal and common thief; then we learn that he was originally sentenced to five years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's starving family. That added context for his "crime" changes our understanding. The battle over standardized sentencing guidelines in the criminal justice system is partly a debate about how much to allow judges sway in taking into account context and individual circumstances in pronouncing sentences.

Naturalistic inquiry preserves natural context. Social psychology experiments under laboratory conditions strip observed ac-

tions from context. But that is the point of such laboratory experiments—to generate findings that are context free. The scientific ideal of generalizing across time and space is the ideal of identifying principles that do not depend on context. In contrast, qualitative inquiry elevates context as critical to understanding. Portraitist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains why she finds context "crucial to the documentation of human experience and organizational culture":

> By context, I mean the setting—physical, geographic, temporal, historical cultural, aesthetic—within which action takes place. Context becomes the framework, the reference point, the map, the ecological sphere; it is used to place people and action in time and space and as a resource for understanding what they say and do. The context is rich in clues for interpreting the experience of the actors in the setting. We have no idea how to decipher or decode an action, a gesture, a conversation, or an exclamation unless we see it embedded in context. (p. 41)

## Voice and Perspective: Reflexivity

*ABSTRACT OF A SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT STUDY*

> This study will delineate the major factors that affect school achievement. Instruments were selected to measure achievement based on validity and reliability criteria. Decisions were made about administering the tests in conjunction with administrators taking into account time and resource constraints. A regression model was constructed to test relationships between various background variables and demonstrated achievement. School records were reviewed and coded to ascertain students' background characteristics. Data were obtained on 120 students from four classrooms. The extraction of significant predictor variables is the purpose of the final analysis. Interviews were conducted with teachers and principals to determine how test scores were used. The analysis concludes with the researcher's interpretations. The researcher wishes to thank those who cooperated in this study.

This journal article abstract represents academic writing as I was taught to do it in graduate school. This writing style still predominates in scholarly journals and books. No human being is visible in this writing. The passive voice reigns. Instruments were selected; decisions were made; a model was constructed; records were reviewed and coded; data were obtained; predictor variables were extracted; interviews were conducted. The warmth of thanks is extended by a role, the researcher: "The researcher wishes to thank those who cooperated." The third-person, passive voice communicates a message: This work is about procedures not people. This academic style is employed to project a sense of objectivity, control, and authority. The overall impression is mechanical, robotlike, distant, detached, systematic, and procedural. The research is the object of attention. Any real, live human being, subject to all the usual foibles of being human, is barely implied, generally disguised, hidden away, and kept in the background.

Contrast that academic voice with my explanation of how I analyzed a 10-day coming-of-age experience with my son in the Grand Canyon. (I presented part of the analysis of that experience as Exhibit 1.3 in the first chapter.) Here's an excerpt in which I describe the analytical process.

> I'm not sure when the notion first took hold of me that articulating alternative coming of age paradigms might help elucidate our Canyon

> experience. Before formally conceptualizing contrasting paradigm dimensions, I experienced them as conflicting feelings that emanated from my struggle to sort out what I wanted my son's initiation to be, while also grappling with defining my role in the process. I suppose the idea of alternative paradigms first emerged the second night as I paced the narrow beach where White Creek intersects Shinumo and pondered the Great Unconformity [a geologic reference] as metaphor for the gap between tribal approaches to initiation and coming of age for contemporary youth. In the weeks and months after our Canyon experience, far from languishing in the throes of retox as I expected, the idea of contrasting paradigms stayed with me, as did the Canyon experience. I started listing themes and matching them with incidents and turning points along the way. The sequence of incidents became this book and the contrasting themes became the basis for this closing chapter, a way for me to figure out how what started out as an initiation become a humanist coming of age celebration. (Patton 1999a:332)

The contrast between the traditional academic voice and the personal voice of qualitative analysis recalls philosopher and theologian Martin Buber's (1923) influential distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. An I-It relationship regards other human beings from a distance, from a superior vantage point of authority, as objects or subjects, things in the environment to be examined and placed in abstract cause-effect chains. An I-Thou perspective, in contrast, acknowledges the humanity of both self and others and implies relationship, mutuality, and genuine dialogue.

The perspective that the researcher brings to a qualitative inquiry is part of the context for the findings. A human being is the instrument of qualitative methods. A real, live person makes observations, takes field notes, asks interview questions, and interprets responses. Self-awareness, then, can be an asset in both fieldwork and analysis. Developing appropriate self-awareness can be a form of "sharpening the instrument" (Brown 1996:42). The methods section of a qualitative study reports on the researcher's training, preparation, fieldwork procedures, and analytical processes. This is both the strength and weakness of qualitative methods, the strength in that a well-trained, experienced, and astute observer adds value and credibility to the inquiry, while an ill-prepared, inexperienced, and imperceptive observer casts doubt on what is reported. Judgments about the significance of findings are thus inevitably connected to the researcher's credibility, competence, thoroughness, and integrity. Those judgments, precisely because they are acknowledged as inevitably personal and perspective dependent, at least to some extent, invite response and dialogue, rather than just acceptance or rejection.

*Reflexivity* has entered the qualitative lexicon as a way of emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, political/cultural consciousness, and ownership of one's perspective.

> In the rush of interest in qualitative research in the past 15 years, few topics have developed as broad a consensus as the relevance of analytic "reflexivity." By most accounts, reflexivity is a deconstructive exercise for locating the intersections of author, other, text, and world, and for penetrating the representational exercise itself. (MacBeth 2001:35)

Being reflexive involves self-questioning and self-understanding, for "all understanding is self-understanding" (Schwandt 1997a:xvi). To be reflexive, then, is to undertake an ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*, "to have an ongoing con-

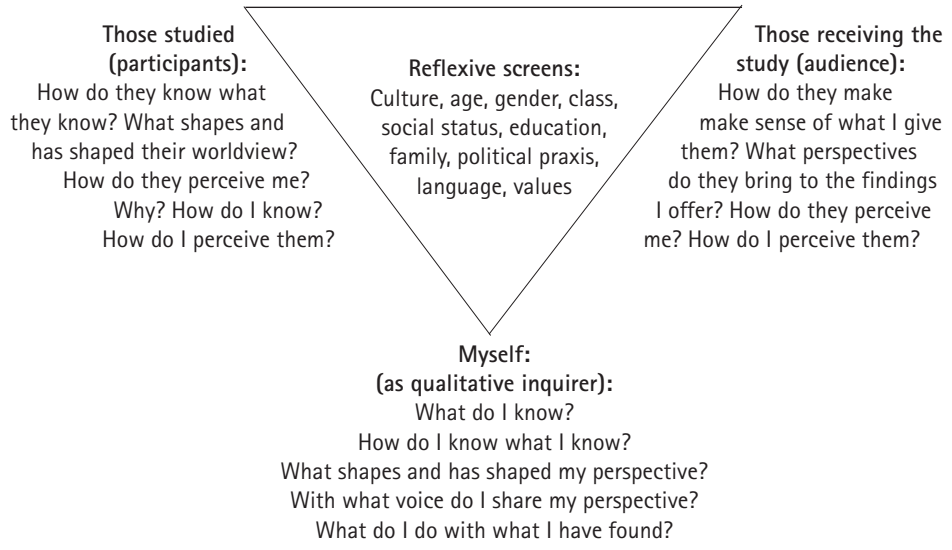
versation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Hertz 1997: viii). Reflexivity reminds the qualitative inquirer to be attentive to and conscious of the cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origins of one's own perspective and voice as well as the perspective and voices of those one interviews and those to whom one reports. Exhibit 2.2 depicts this reflexive triangulation.

Writing in the first-person, active voice communicates the inquirer's self-aware role in the inquiry: "I started listing themes and matching them with incidents and turning points along the way." The passive voice does not: "Themes were listed and matched to incidents and turning points along the way." Judith Brown (1996) captured the importance of the first-person voice in the title of her book *The I in Science: Training to Utilize Subjectivity in Research.* By subjectivity she means "the domain of experiential self-knowledge" (p. 1). Voice reveals and communicates this domain.

But voice is more than grammar. A credible, authoritative, authentic, and trustworthy voice engages the reader through rich description, thoughtful sequencing, appropriate use of quotes, and contextual clarity so that the reader joins the inquirer in the search for meaning. And there are choices of voice: the didactic voice of the teacher; the searching, logical voice of the sleuth; the narrator voice of the storyteller; the personal voice of the autoethnographer; the doubting voice of the skeptic; the intimacy of the insider's voice; the detachment of the outsider's voice; the searching voice of uncertainty; and the excited voice of discovery, to offer but a few examples. Just as point of view and voice have become focal points of writing good fiction and nonfiction, as in Nancy Mairs's (1997) *Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer,* so too qualitative analysts are having to learn about, take into account, and communicate perspective and voice. Balancing critical and creative analyses, description and interpretation, or direct quotation and synopsis also involves issues of perspective, audience, purpose, and voice. No rules or formula can tell a qualitative analyst precisely what balance is right or which voice to use, only that finding both balance and voice is part of the work and challenge of qualitative inquiry, what Lewis (2001) has acknowledged as "the difficulty of trying to situate the I in narrative research" (p. 109).

In addition to *finding voice,* the critical and creative writing involved in qualitative analysis and synthesis challenge the inquirer to *own one's voice and perspective.* Here, we owe much to feminist theory for highlighting and deepening our understanding of the intricate and implicate relationships between language, voice, and consciousness (e.g., Gilligan 1982; Minnich 1990). We are challenged by postmodern critiques of knowledge to be clear about and own our authorship of whatever we propound, to be self-reflective, to acknowledge biases and limitations, and to honor multiple perspectives (Greene 1998a, 1998b; Mabry 1997) while "accepting incredulity and doubt as modal postmodern responses to all attempts to explain ourselves to ourselves" (Schwandt 1997b:102). From struggles to locate and acknowledge the inevitably political and moral nature of evaluative judgments, we are challenged to connect voice and perspective to *praxis*—acting in the world with an appreciation for and recognition of how those actions inherently express social, political, and moral values (Schwandt 1989, 2000) and to personalize evaluation (Kushner 2000), both by owning our own perspective and by taking seriously the responsibility to communicate authentically the perspectives of those we encounter during our inquiry. These represent some

**EXHIBIT 2.2** Reflexive Questions: Triangulated Inquiry




of the more prominent contextual forces that have elevated the importance of owning voice and perspective in qualitative analysis.

It takes no great self-awareness or self-confidence to report a statistically significant *t* test with confidence intervals based on a formula and calculations easily replicated and confirmed. It can take considerable self-awareness and confidence to report: I coded these 40 interviews, these are the themes I found, here is what I think they mean, and here is the process I undertook to arrive at those meanings. The latter statement calls for, even demands, a sense of voice and perspective.

## From Strategic Ideals to Practical Choices

The 12 themes of qualitative inquiry reviewed in this chapter are strategic ideals: real-world observations through naturalistic inquiry; openness, responsiveness, and flexibility through emergent designs; focus through purposeful sampling; richness and depth through qualitative data; use of all of one's capacities through personal experience and engagement; balancing the critical and creative through a stance of empathic neutrality; sensitivity to dynamic processes and systems; appreciation of idiosyncrasies through a unique case orientation; insight and understanding through inductive analysis, contextual sensitivity, and a holistic perspective; and authenticity and trustworthiness through ownership of voice and perspective. These are not absolute and universal characteristics of qualitative inquiry, but rather strategic ideals that provide a direction and framework for developing specific designs and concrete data collection tactics.

Ideally, a pure qualitative inquiry strategy includes all the themes and dimensions identified in this chapter. For example, in an

ideal naturalistic/inductive inquiry the researcher neither manipulates the setting under study nor predetermines what variables or categories are worth measuring. In practice, however, it is important to recognize that **actually conducting holistic-inductive analysis and implementing naturalistic inquiry are always a matter of degree.** In making this point, Guba (1978) has depicted the practice of naturalistic inquiry as a wave on which the investigator moves from varying degrees of a "discovery mode" to varying emphasis of a "verification mode" in attempting to understand the real world. As fieldwork begins, the inquirer is open to whatever emerges from the data, a discovery or inductive approach. Then, as the inquiry reveals patterns and major dimensions of interest, the investigator will begin to focus on verifying and elucidating what appears to be emerging—a more deductive approach to data collection and analysis. In essence, what is discovered may be verified by going back to the world under study and examining the extent to which the emergent analysis *fits* the phenomenon and *works to explain* what has been observed. Glaser and Strauss (1967), in their classic framing of grounded theory, described what it means for results to fit and work: "By 'fit' we mean that the categories must be readily (not forcibly) applicable to and indicated by the data under study; by 'work' we mean that they must be meaningfully relevant to and be able to explain the behavior under study" (p. 3). Discovery and verification mean moving back and forth between induction and deduction, between experience and reflection on experience, and between greater degrees and lesser degrees of naturalistic inquiry.

In program evaluation in particular, the evaluator may, through feedback of initial findings to program participants and staff, begin to affect the program quite directly and intentionally (given the job of helping improve the program), thus moving away from a purely naturalistic approach. As evaluative feedback is used to improve the program, the evaluator may then move back into a more naturalistic stance to observe how the feedback-induced changes in the program unfold.

In the same vein, the attempt to understand a program or treatment as a whole does not mean that the investigator never becomes involved in component analysis or in looking at particular variables, dimensions, and parts of the phenomenon under study. Rather, it means that the qualitative inquirer consciously works back and forth between parts and wholes, separate variables, and complex, interwoven constellations of variables in a sorting-out then putting-back-together process. While staying true to a strategy that emphasizes the importance of a holistic picture of the program, the qualitative evaluator recognizes that certain periods of fieldwork may focus on component, variable, and less-than-the-whole kinds of analysis.

The practice and practicalities of fieldwork also mean that the strategic mandate to "get close" to the people and setting under study is neither absolute nor fixed. Closeness to and involvement with the people under study are most usefully viewed as variable dimensions. The personal styles and capabilities of evaluators will permit and necessitate variance along these dimensions. Variations in types of programs and evaluation purposes will affect the extent to which an evaluator can or ought to get close to the program staff and participants. Moreover, closeness is likely to vary over the course of an evaluation. At times the evaluator may become totally immersed in the program experience. These periods of im-

mersion may be followed by times of withdrawal and distance (for personal as well as methodological reasons), to be followed still later by new experiences of immersion in and direct experience with the program.

Nor is it necessary to be a qualitative methods purist. Qualitative data can be collected and used in conjunction with quantitative data. Today's evaluator must be sophisticated about matching research methods to the nuances of particular evaluation questions and the idiosyncrasies of specific stakeholder needs. Such an evaluator needs a large repertoire of research methods and techniques to use on a variety of problems. Thus, an evaluator may be called on to use any and all social science research methods, including analyses of quantitative data, questionnaires, secondary data analysis, cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses, standardized tests, experimental designs, unobtrusive measures, participant observation, and in-depth interviewing. The evaluation researcher works with intended users of the findings to design an evaluation that includes any and all data that will help shed light on important evaluation questions, given constraints of resources and time. Such an evaluator is committed to research designs that are relevant, meaningful, understandable, and able to produce useful results that are valid, reliable, and believable. On many occasions a variety of data collection techniques and design approaches may be used together. Multiple methods and a variety of data types can contribute to methodological rigor. The ideal in evaluation designs is methodological appropriateness, design flexibility, and situational responsiveness in the service of utility (Patton 1997a)—not absolute allegiance to some ideal standard of paradigm purity and methodological orthodoxy.

## Beyond Competing Inquiry Paradigms

Having presented the strategic ideals of qualitative inquiry and noted variations in their practical implementation and attainment, before closing this chapter I want to acknowledge and comment on the controversy that sometimes engulfs qualitative methods. Students attempting to do qualitative dissertations can get caught up in and may have to defend, philosophically as well as methodologically, the use of qualitative inquiry to skeptical committee members who define doctoral-level work as rigorous hypothesis testing. Evaluators may encounter policymakers and funders who dismiss qualitative data as mere anecdote. The statistically addicted may poke fun at what they call the "softness" of qualitative data. (In Western society, where anything can be and often is sexualized, the distinction between "hard" data and "soft" data has additional nuances of meaning and innuendo.) Such encounters derive from a long-standing methodological paradigms war. Though many have pronounced the war and even the debate over (cf. Cook 1995; Greene 1998a:36; Patton 1997a: 290-95), not everyone has adopted a stance of methodological enlightenment and tolerance, namely, that methodological orthodoxy, superiority, and purity should yield to methodological appropriateness, pragmatism, and mutual respect. Therefore, a brief review of the paradigms debate is in order. (Elsewhere I have provided a more extensive review of the methodological paradigms debate; Patton 1997a: 265-99, 1988c.)

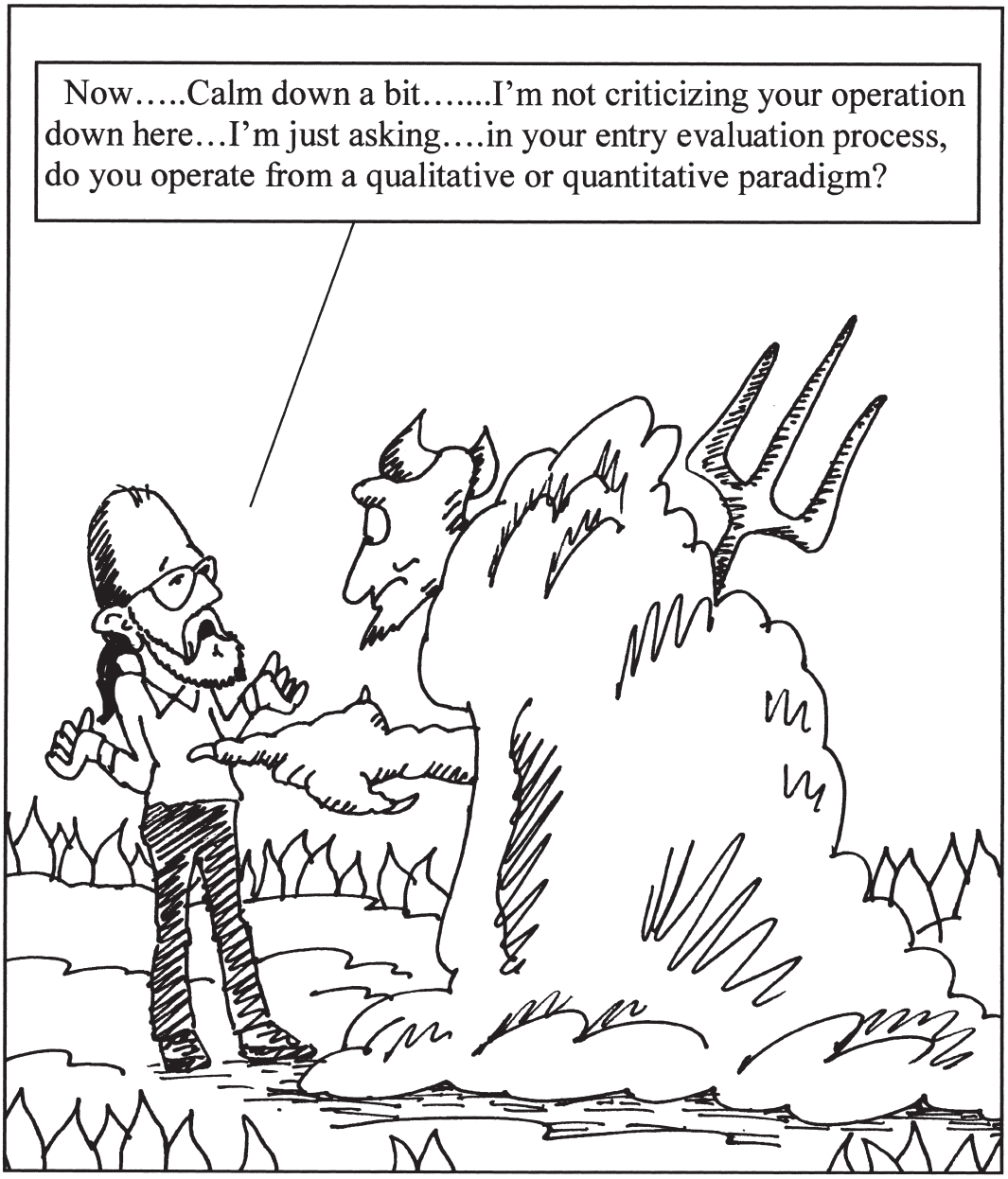
Philosophers of science and methodologists have been engaged in a long-standing epistemological debate about the nature of "reality" and knowledge. That philosophical debate finds its way into research and

evaluation in arguments over the goals of empirical studies and differences of opinion about what constitutes "good" research. In its simplest and most strident formulation, this debate has centered on the relative value of two different and competing inquiry paradigms: (1) using quantitative and experimental methods to generate and test hypothetical-deductive generalizations versus (2) using qualitative and naturalistic approaches to inductively and holistically understand human experience and constructed meanings in context-specific settings. For example, Taylor and Bogdan (1984) contrast the *Verstehen* tradition, rooted in qualitative phenomenology, to measurement-oriented positivism as follows:

> Two major theoretical perspectives have dominated the social science scene. The first, *positivism,* traces its origins in the social sciences to the great theorists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and especially to Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. The positivist seeks the *facts* or *causes* of social phenomena apart from the subjective states of individuals. Durkheim told the social scientist to consider social facts, or social phenomena, as "things" that exercise an external influence on people.
>
> The second theoretical perspective, which, following the lead of Deutscher, we will describe as *phenomenological,* has a long history in philosophy and sociology. The phenomenologist is committed to *understanding* social phenomena from the actor's own perspective. He or she examines how the world is experienced. The important reality is what people perceive it to be. (pp. 1-2)

Debate about these contrasting and competing perspectives has been an important part of the history of research and evaluation, but, as Chapters 3, 4, and 9 will show, the variety of inquiry approaches has expanded well beyond the simplistic dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. In contrast to these two classically opposed orthodoxies, this book offers a pragmatic strategy of matching concrete methods to specific questions, including the option of tactically mixing methods as needed and appropriate. My practical (and controversial) view is that one can learn to be a good interviewer or observer, and learn to make sense of the resulting data, without first engaging in deep epistemological reflection and philosophical study. Such reflection and study can be helpful to those so inclined, but it is not a prerequisite for fieldwork. Indeed, it can be a hindrance. Getting some field experience first, then studying philosophy of science, has much to recommend it as a learning strategy. Otherwise, it's all abstractions. Still, the paradigms debate is part of our methodological heritage and knowing a bit about it, and its distortions (Shadish 1995b, 1995c), may deepen appreciation for the importance of a strategic approach to methods decision making.

A paradigm is a worldview—a way of thinking about and making sense of the complexities of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners. Paradigms tell us what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological consideration. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both strength and weakness—a strength in that it makes action relatively easy, a weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm.






**Are there paradigms after death?**

Scientists work from models acquired through education and through subsequent exposure to the literature often without quite knowing or needing to know what characteristics have given these models the status of community paradigms. . . . That scientists do not usually ask or debate what makes a particular problem or solution legitimate tempts us to suppose that, at least intuitively, they know the answer. But it may only indicate that neither the question nor the answer is felt to be relevant to their research. Paradigms may be prior

> to, more binding, and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them. (Kuhn 1970:46)

But what does all this matter to the student interested in pursuing some research or evaluation question? It matters because paradigm-derived biases are the source of the distinctions mentioned earlier between "hard" data and "soft" data, empirical studies versus "mere anecdotes," and "objective" research versus "subjective" studies. These labels reveal value-laden prejudices about what constitute credible and valuable contributions to knowledge. Such prejudices and paradigmatic blinders limit methodological choices, flexibility, and creativity. Adherence to a methodological paradigm can lock researchers into unconscious patterns of perception and behavior that disguise the biased, predetermined nature of their methods "decisions." Methods decisions tend to stem from disciplinary prescriptions, concerns about scientific status, old methodological habits, and comfort with what the researcher knows best. Training and academic socialization tend to make researchers biased in favor of and against certain approaches.

While one may still encounter people who rigidly confess allegiance to only quantitative or qualitative methods, most practitioners appear to have become eclectic and pragmatic. Looking back, we can now see that the qualitative-quantitative debate oversimplified and often confused methodological and philosophical issues. For example, the notion that some combinations of methods and philosophy ever constituted consistent, coherent, and stable paradigms has proved problematic. Shadish (1995c), for example, in introducing an important set of articles aimed at "de-Kuhnifying" the debate, concluded that "there is little empirical evidence in support of such a Kuhnian paradigm portrayal. . . . [T]he relevant conceptual and philosophical issues are far more complex than the simple quantitative-qualitative dichotomy implies" (p. 48). Chapter 9 will revisit the quantitative-qualitative paradigms debate in more depth as part of our examination of issues that affect judgments about the quality and credibility of qualitative methods.

## Pragmatism

> Every thinker puts some portion of an apparently stable world in peril.
>
> —John Dewey (1929)

While a paradigm offers a coherent worldview, an anchor of stability and certainty in the real world sea of chaos, operating narrowly within any singular paradigm can be quite limiting. As a pragmatist, I take issue as much with the purist, one-sided advocacy of Lincoln and Guba (1985), who believe that naturalistic inquiry is the only valid and meaningful way to study human beings, as I do with the narrow, intolerant stance of Boruch and Rindskopf (1984), who assert that randomized experiments are "the standard against which other designs for impact evaluation are judged" (p. 21). My pragmatic stance aims to supersede one-sided paradigm allegiance by increasing the concrete and practical methodological options available to researchers and evaluators. Such pragmatism means judging the quality of a study by its intended purposes, available resources, procedures followed, and results obtained, all within a particular

context and for a specific audience. When a new drug is tested before being made available to the general population, a double-blind randomized experiment to determine efficacy is the design of choice, with careful attention to controlled and carefully measured dosage and outcome interactions, including side effects. But if the concern is whether people take the new drug appropriately, and one wants to know what people in a group think about the new drug (e.g., an antidepressant), how they make sense of taking or not taking it, what they believe about themselves as a result of experiencing the drug, and how those around them deal with it, then in-depth interviews and observations are the place to start. The importance of understanding alternative research paradigms is to sensitize researchers and evaluators to the ways in which their methodological prejudices, derived from their disciplinary socialization experiences, may reduce their methodological flexibility and adaptability.

I reiterate: Being pragmatic allows one to eschew methodological orthodoxy in favor of *methodological appropriateness* as the primary criterion for judging methodological quality, recognizing that different methods are appropriate for different situations. Situational responsiveness means designing a study that is appropriate for a specific inquiry situation or interest. A major purpose of this book, and the focus of Chapter 4, is to identify the kinds of research questions and program evaluation situations for which qualitative inquiry is the appropriate method of choice.

Paradigms are really about epistemology, ontology, and philosophy of science. As such, paradigms are important theoretical constructs for illuminating fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality. But at the pragmatic level of making concrete methods decisions, this chapter's emphasis on strategic choices has conveyed, I hope, the idea that a wide range of possibilities exists when selecting methods. The point is to do what makes sense, report fully on what was done, why it was done, and what the implications are for findings. Chapter 5 is devoted to design issues, including design flexibility, using multiple methods, and making practical decisions.

A Sufi story about the wise fool Mulla Nasrudin illustrates the importance of understanding the connections between strategic ideals and practical tactics in real-world situations. Real-world situations seldom resemble the theoretical ideals taught in the classroom.

## Ideal Conditions for Research: A Cautionary Tale

In his youth, Nasrudin received training in a small monastery noted for its excellence in the teaching of martial arts. Nasrudin became highly skilled in self-defense and after two years of training both his peers and his teachers recognized his superior abilities.

Each day, it was the responsibility of one of the students to go to the village market to beg for alms and food. It happened that a small band of three thieves moved into the area. They observed how the monastery obtained food daily and began hiding along the path the students had to take back to the monastery. As a returning student returned, laden with food and alms, the thieves would attack. After three days of such losses, the monastery's few supplies were exhausted. It was Nasrudin's turn to go to the village market. His elders and peers were confident that Nasrudin's martial arts skills were more than sufficient to overcome the small band of thieves.

At the end of the day, Nasrudin returned ragged, beaten, and empty-handed. Everyone was amazed. Nasrudin was taken im-

mediately before the Master. "Nasrudin," he asked, "how is it that with all your skill in our ancient arts of defense, you were overcome?"

"But I did not use the ancient arts," replied Nasrudin.

All present were dumbfounded. An explanation was demanded.

"All of our competitions are preceded by great and courteous ceremony," Nasrudin explained. "We have learned that the opening prayers, the ceremonial cleansing, the bow to the East—these are essential to the ancient ways. The ruffians seemed not to understand the necessity for these things. I didn't find the situation ideal enough to use the methods you have taught us, Master."

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On more than one occasion, researchers or evaluators have told me of their belief in the *potential* usefulness of qualitative methods, but they tell me, "I just haven't found the ideal situation in which to use them."

Ideal situations are rare, but we will consider throughout this book the questions and conditions in which qualitative strategies and methods offer advantages. In Chapter 4, I will present a range and variety of situations and inquiry problems that particularly lend themselves to qualitative inquiry. Chapter 5 will then discuss in more detail some of the methodological trade-offs involved in adapting the strategic ideals of qualitative methods to the practical realities of conducting research and evaluation in the field. Chapters devoted to observation, interviewing, analysis, and enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative studies follow that design chapter. To lay the groundwork for in-depth review of applications and methods, the next chapter examines alternative theoretical frameworks that are closely associated with and used to guide qualitative inquiry.

## Note

1. Excerpts in this chapter from the interview with Brackette F. Williams are used with her permission.