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### CHAPTER THREE

## Qualitative Methods

#### This chapter explores:

- (1) How researchers may formulate their research questions.
- (2) Qualitative methods that can be used to elicit information and data from activists—including interviews and focus groups, and ethnography and field-work—and how these methods can be used in online environments.
- (3) Qualitative methods that can be used to explore texts associated with activists or activist organizations, including qualitative content analysis and rhetorical criticism.
- (4) Tips for managing data throughout the research process.

For the most part, qualitative research methods help to gain insight into the processes involved in co-constructions of meaning, lived experiences, cultural rituals, and oppressive practices. This chapter (like the book) is framed in a way so that scholars adhering to all methodologies (or any combination of methodological positions) can benefit from the review of these methods. Methods are not anchored to specific methodological positions, but are informed by those positions. As noted in chapter 2, methods are tools and consist of processes, whereas methodologies constitute guiding frameworks; methodology steers the use of methods. Qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups, as

well as participant observation, have the potential to play integral roles for all academic endeavors in terms of the formulation of questions, building operational definitions, and designing research instruments.

Feminist methodology can help to better demonstrate the association between the methodology and method discussed here and in chapter 2. Feminist methodology is grounded in an ontological and epistemological vision focused primarily on patriarchal power structures and the lives of women (and minorities) who are marginalized and silenced by these power structures; the concept of standpoint theory helps to explain this grounding, as well as many of the overall goals of feminist research. This methodology is not a method that can be used to study lived experiences or perspectives of women and marginalized people, but rather a framework that helps researchers to better understand what it is that they are searching for and examining (e.g., Harding 1987; Sprague 2005). The key tenets of standpoint theory—shared location, engagement, and recognition of different circumstances in various cultural locations—covers aspects of communication and meaning that are important for the social construction of reality; these in turn become the focus of inquiry. In this way, feminist methodology helps researchers to understand that they should ask questions about “hidden” experiences of women in interviews (e.g., Dougherty 1999; Dougherty and Krone 2000; Hesse-Biber 2014a), focus on women’s lives and activities in ethnographies (e.g., Buch and Staller 2014), or identify categories related to gender or sexuality and how they relate to power and agency in textual analysis (e.g., Foss 2004; McIntosh and Cuklanz 2014; Ruddock 2001).

Moreover, these tenets and assumptions not only inform the researchers’ inquiries, but also guide the way in which they conduct research and engage with participants. As standpoint theory is interested in engagement and building community, methods carried out from feminist methodology also position researchers in ways to accomplish those goals. For instance, Dougherty notes that interviews should not merely be about eliciting information from participants. Rather, the grounding in feminist theory should lead researchers to use interviews to help women gain a voice and build an understanding about the power structures around them (see Dougherty 1999; Dougherty, Baiocchi-Wagner, and McGuire 2011), as well as confront oppressive patriarchal practices whenever they are encountered (see Dougherty and Atkinson 2006). Similarly, Jennie Munday (2014) claims that focus groups should be conducted in a way so that women and marginalized people can talk among themselves and develop an understanding about the circumstances of their cultural location; the method can effectively aid in the formation of community.

Ultimately, methodology influences method. For instance, in a study concerning the empowerment of incarcerated women, Jenna Stephenson-Abetz

(2012) analyzes the relationships between feminist activist mothers and their daughters; she conducted interviews with the daughters in order to demonstrate how feminist consciousness is passed on and evolves. Her interviews focus on the relationships and community building that went on over time between mothers and daughters. In another instance, Suzanne Enck and Blake McDaniel (2015) interviewed women who were in the Dallas County Jail. The two researchers were working with an organization called Resolana, which was established to educate and empower incarcerated women so that they may take control of their lives following their release. Eliciting information for the study was only part of the interviews that they conducted; helping the women to build knowledge and skills in communication and storytelling was also of profound importance to Enck and McDaniel. In this way, their method was integral to helping the incarcerated women to recognize the circumstances of specific cultural locations and provided them with the skills necessary to become part of larger shared feminist communities. The focus of inquiry and enactment of process in both of these examples were guided by the ontology and epistemology of feminist methodology.

This chapter addresses the processes associated with the different methods that are available to researchers and forms the basis for the following chapters on research sites.

#### FORMULATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The previous two chapters elaborated on the history of research concerning social activism and social movements, as well as the philosophical underpinnings of activism. Essentially, the information in those chapters enables researchers to better understand how their projects fit into the research that has come before and how to conceptualize and approach activists and their endeavors. This information can also aid in the formulation of guiding research questions, as well as the decision about research instruments such as interview schedules.

The formulation of research questions is integral as those questions help to guide the current project and perhaps even help to build the foundation for a larger research agenda. Good research questions should be clear and concise and use terms that are well established, defined, and understood (Kvale 2007; Brinkmann and Kvale 2014; Moustakas 1994). Well-formed research questions on social activism require researchers to: (1) identify the activists, (2) note what makes them activists, (3) relate their activism to a particular research site, and (4) distinguish the primary unit of analysis. First, it is important to identify the activists and note what it is about them that makes them activists. On the surface this seems to be straightforward, but as demonstrated in the previous chapter, this can be rather complex. Under the attribute model of the individual

a person is an activist based on traits, such as the actions that they take (e.g., marching in a protest). Within the context of the conjunctive model, however, affiliation with a particular activist group, such as Focus on the Family, can warrant the designation “activist”; such an individual might never take part in any action, but they are considered to be an activist due to their affiliation with the organization. What might appear to be activism within the framework of one methodological position may not be considered to be activism under another. Therefore, the researcher must identify the potential participants who would be the subject of his or her study, and then justify the classification of those people as activists. Next, the researcher must relate the activism of the potential participants to a particular research site. As noted previously, there are four primary research sites in which activism can be observed and explored: organizations, networks, protests and events, and alternative media (see chapters 4 to 7 for details). Note that research sites are intertwined with the construction of research questions. Identification of a research site provides a way of narrowing the research question into something more manageable, while also helping to situate the project within the history of similar research. Finally, the researcher should distinguish the primary unit of analysis for the project. Units of analysis are subjects that will be examined by the researcher in the process of the research; units of analysis can be media subjects, texts, narratives, or performances (December 1996; Schreier 2012). Essentially, this last step identifies what the researcher will be examining in the project.

Take, for instance, the following research question that I posed in one of my own research projects (Atkinson 2009a, 50): “What problems have arisen in the Erie City new social movement network to hinder the emergence of a multiplex?” In this particular project, I questioned why activists from different organizations within a particular local network had difficulty constructing a resistance “multiplex,” or coordinated performance of resistance. Why were the different nodes of the network not coming together to protest or engage in activities? Within the context of this research, the activists were those people affiliated with different activist groups in the city of Erie; activism was group affiliation or alliance with a group. More importantly, the research question zooms in on a particular research site (the network of organizations in Erie) and the unit of analysis (hindrances to coordinated resistance discussed in activist interviews). With the research question established, I could focus on the relationships between individuals, as well as between the various activist groups. That is not to say that interview questions focused solely on those issues. Rather, the research question led me to search through interview transcripts for examples of conflict or anything else that might hinder the groups from acting together.

### Recap 3-1. Steps for Formulating Research Questions

- (1) Identify the activists.
- (2) Note what makes them activists.
- (3) Relate their activism to a research site (e.g., organizations, networks, events, or alternative media).
- (4) Distinguish the primary units of analysis.

The establishment of the research question is crucial as it not only provides some direction for a project, but also aids in the construction of the research instruments and protocols. The research question—and particularly the identification of the units of analysis necessary for the research—aids in the decision about which methods to employ. For instance, if researchers were interested in the role of stories in socializing new members of an activist organization, then discussions about such stories in interviews or recorded in field notes could serve as units of analysis. If they were interested in the depictions of power in alternative media, then magazines or web pages could be units. In the previous example, I was interested in personal relationships or grievances that hindered the ability of different organizations or nodes in a local network from coming together into coordinated protests. The unit of analysis, then, needed to be discussions or stories about personal relationships or problems between organizations. A review of alternative media or websites produced by the different nodes in the network would not effectively address the research question. What I needed was a method that would elicit discussions from activists affiliated from the different nodes; in this case, interviews were deemed to be sufficient to answer the guiding research question. However, understanding which method to use is only the beginning. How should interviews be administered? How should texts be analyzed? How should data be managed?

### INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

Interviews and focus groups are the most prevalent qualitative methods used by scholars who operate from ontological positions focused on social construction and the negotiation of meaning, and these methods can also often supplement positivist and post-positivist quantitative endeavors. For the most part, interviews constitute one-on-one conversations between the researcher and a single participant, while focus groups are conversations between the researcher and multiple participants. Essentially, both methods involve the researcher asking participants a series of questions and allowing those participants to provide answers. The way in which those methods are carried out,

however, often depends on the goals of the research; does the researcher seek descriptions of phenomena from participants, or does he or she seek to understand the processes of constructing intersubjective meaning? The basic structure of the interview or focus group can ultimately help to elicit one or the other.

## INTERVIEWS

There are two general processes for interviewing research participants: structured and unstructured interviews. Structured interviews are highly dependent on schedules of questions to be asked of participants during their conversations with the researcher (Fontana and Frey 1998; Lindlof and Taylor 2010; Rubin and Rubin 1995). This schedule is a point-by-point list of all of the questions that will be asked by the researcher. The schedule is typically followed strictly from one interview to the next, with the researcher asking the questions exactly as worded and ordered in the schedule. The unstructured interviews—also known as unstandardized (Kvale 2007; Brinkmann and Kvale 2014) or ethnographic (Lindlof and Taylor 2010) interviews—do not follow the strict schedule described here. Instead, researchers work with a subject guide that provides for them a list of all of the important topics that they should cover with participants (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Rubin and Rubin 1995). The guide typically presents simple descriptions of the subjects, rather than the specific questions used in structured interviews. In this way, researchers are free to move through the subject guide as they see fit, checking off topics as they are addressed through conversation with the participants.

Both formats of qualitative research have their advantages and disadvantages. The structured format allows for very little deviation in the way in which questions are presented to the participants. This ensures that the data that is collected from the interviews is well organized and ready for analysis (Huberman and Miles 1998); such uniformity of questions and answers can greatly aid in the constant comparative process that is typically utilized in grounded theory and thematic analyses. In addition, such structure makes it easier to train assistants who can aid in the research process; the step-by-step schedule ensures that assistants and co-researchers can produce comparable data in their own interviews with participants. However, structured formats can create redundancy, as participants may very well provide an answer to a question that indirectly addresses a subject that is part of a later question in the schedule; the later question forces the participants to repeat themselves. Also, the formal approach in the structured format can be off-putting to activists who are wary of such conventions; the approach can be likened to government or corporate bureaucracy. In contrast, the unstructured format provides a degree of flexibil-

ity to how the researcher approaches a topic with the participants (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Lindlof and Taylor 2010); the interview can be more conversational and less “bureaucratic.” This can provide a more relaxed environment, particularly for activists who might be leery of outsiders. In addition, the flexibility of the unstructured format allows the researcher to ask probing questions that may lead to new subject matter that was not addressed in the original guide, allowing the research to grow organically (Kvale 2007; Brinkmann and Kvale 2014). This organic growth can be problematic, however, as the researcher will often be compelled to go back to previous participants and ask them about these new subjects; this can become particularly troublesome when such backtracking occurs multiple times. In addition, the unstructured format can be quite “messy” for the purposes of data analysis. As the conversations flow through the subject guide with the conversations, it can be quite difficult to make comparisons across interviews (Huberman and Miles 1998).

These two processes arise from the use of a schedule of questions or a less rigid subject guide. The researcher’s more specific goals also impact how he or she carries out the interviews. Specific goals for research projects vary widely, but there are two fundamental goals that qualitative interviews can seek to fulfill: gain descriptive information or allow for the participants to tell stories. The first goal seeks direct answers to questions that address a subject or phenomenon, while the latter seeks to coax narratives out of the participants that will give the researcher insight into lived experiences and meanings. Kvale (1996) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) liken the researcher to a miner or traveler in order to fully explore the differences between these approaches. On the one hand, the researcher as a miner digs into the participant for nuggets of information. The traveler, conversely, engages in a journey with the participant; the interview questions allow for both researcher and participant to explore meanings and lived experiences. The survey interview format is best used to fulfill the goal of mining for descriptive information about the phenomena under investigation. Also known as the informant interview (Lindlof and Taylor 2010), this mode of interviewing assumes that the participant is a vessel that harbors valuable answers that are needed to address the guiding goals of the research (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Schaeffer and Maynard 2003). Essentially, the researcher finds participants with knowledge about subject matter that is important to his or her research and then approaches them to gain insights about that subject. According to Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor (2002, 177), good informants are those who have “experience in the cultural scene,” are engaged in the scene in “many different roles,” are “well respected by their peers,” or are “facile speakers of the local language forms and can debrief the researcher on contextualized uses and



meanings.” As the researcher is in search of specific information from the participants, structured interviews with the schedule of questions is often the best format. The questions are typically limited in scope and do not allow for the participant to elaborate much beyond that precise issue (e.g., how many people were at the protest?). This makes it easy for the researcher to compare and contrast the answers that are given from one interview to the next, so as to construct a complete and rich picture of the subject at hand.

Research conducted by Melissa Click and Ronit Ridberg (2010) serves as a good example of survey interviews used to elicit descriptive information. Click and Ridberg examined the ways in which activists collectively engaged in food preservation with others, which involved two primary methods: a quantitative online survey and survey interviews. At one point of the online survey, activists were asked whether they would be willing to engage in telephone interviews at a later date. Overall, Click and Ridberg conducted thirty structured survey interviews, which included the following:

The protocol’s 15 open-ended questions were designed to examine four general areas of interest: food values and habits (e.g. how they think about food and how that materializes in their daily lives), attitudes about and reflections on their food-preservation activities (e.g. how they feel during and after preserving food; how food preservation has changed how they think about food), participation in and evaluation of food movements (e.g., do they consider themselves to be part of a food movement; do they see their food preservation practices as food activism), and hopes for the future of food (e.g., what changes do they hope to see in our food system; what role might preserving play in the food system nationally). The final section of the protocol asked the respondents to verify the demographic information they reported on the on line survey. (306–307)

The fifteen questions in their survey interview required that the activists provide direct answers about particular topics or issues. The questions constrained the answers and discussion to very specific areas of interest for the researchers concerning food preservation. When asked about whether they saw their food preservation as activism, respondents did not have the opportunity to discuss their views on war, corporations, or gun control. Overall, the information from these interviews provided the researchers with ample description of the collective activities that the activists engaged in to preserve food.

Postmodern interviewing is a term that can be attributed to different interview formats that were developed to provide a framework to participants so that they may weave narratives and stories; such narratives communicate lived experiences, interpretations, and processes of meaning making (Fontana 2003; Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). This form of

interview fits into Kvale's (1996) and Brinkmann and Kvale's (2009) metaphor of the researcher as traveler. The term—which was used by Andrea Fontana and James Frey (2000) and developed by Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (2003)—is less of a format and more of a sensibility and orientation for qualitative research. This approach to interviewing is grounded in the ontological and epistemological views of interpretivism; that is to say, the method of postmodern interviewing focuses on the intersubjective co-construction of meaning, as well as the interpretation of meaning. Postmodern interviewing can focus on the meanings that are constructed through relationships, the processes of meaning-making, or the lived experiences that shape meaning and interpretation. Although they have some differences, the long interview (McCracken 1988), active interview (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995), and respondent interview and narrative interview (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) all require that researchers format their questions in such a way so as to provide participants with agency. Essentially, participants should have the ability to relay stories to researchers that encapsulate their understanding about the subject at hand (Fontana 2003; Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Kvale 2007; Rubin and Rubin 1995). This is typically accomplished with short, open-ended questions that allow participants to elaborate with little constraint imposed from the researchers (e.g., tell me how you became involved in activism). In this way, the postmodern interview process is more conducive to the unstructured format described earlier, although a strict schedule could also be utilized. The objective of the interview is to provide an environment that encourages discussion about the experiences of the participants, as well as insight into their understanding about the complex meanings associated with the topics that are the focus of the research project. The questions provide a framework that allows for the illustration of reality, as the participant perceives it to be. This helps to activate different aspects of the participants' experiences so as to establish their knowledge about certain matters, while also allowing them to elaborate and converse with little prompting. The interviewer takes the information and experiences of a participant and uses them as the basis for relating to other participants. This format of interviewing orients to and gathers data about the knowledge that is being constructed as the participant weaves narratives in response to the researcher's queries, so that contrasting narrative contexts and linkages about substantive matters may become apparent from one interview to the next (Gubrium and Holstein 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Coherent, meaningful structures emerge through patterned narrative linkages between interviews: "Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably active. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter. Respondents are

not so much repositories of knowledge—treasuries of information awaiting excavation—as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. Participation in an interview involves meaning-making work” (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 68).

According to Kvale (1996) and Brinkmann and Kvale (2014), knowledge exists in a relationship between the subject and the world. For this reason, the postmodern interview is well suited for the examination of the processes and structures that are associated with activist endeavors. The social environment of activism exists in terms of the relationships that the members have with power structures in society and organizations or networks that resist the status quo. The postmodern interview can bring to light the intertwined relationships that exist through the conversational interview process. The nature of this interview process taps into the knowledge and perceptions about morality, justice, and power in society. The interview questions can be used to help visualize the flow of information to the participants, where that information comes from, and how that information is incorporated into their knowledge and perceptions.

Sara DeTurk’s (2011) research concerning activists who protest on behalf of people who are subjected to racism is a good example of postmodern interviewing with a subject guide. DeTurk interviewed fifteen participants, asking them broad questions from a subject guide that enabled the activists to elaborate on their personal experiences of racism, as well as their experiences challenging racism in society:

1. What does it mean for you to be an ally?
2. What do you do as an ally?
3. How did you become an ally?
4. How is your experience or identity as an ally supported and/or challenged? (DeTurk 2001, 588)

These questions are significantly different from those posed by Click and Ridberg. Each question required that the activists engage in storytelling rather than provide direct answers about specific topics. The questions provided a degree of freedom to the activists so that they could bring in a variety of different topics and elements so as to weave a narrative. They could discuss their families, their political beliefs, or aspects of mainstream media or culture. Such freedom gave the activists control over the content of the conversation and discussion. This also gave rise to more than just descriptions of activism, but insight into experiences and knowledge held by the activists. By tapping into their experiences and knowledge, DeTurk was able to demonstrate an “ally identity” that such activists constructed.

## FOCUS GROUPS

Also known as group interviews (Fontana and Frey 1998; 2005; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005; Kvale 1996), focus groups represent a conversation between researcher and multiple participants at one time. A focus group can be structured or unstructured, utilized for mining information or engaging in building a framework for exploring the participants' reality. Much of the material mentioned in the previous section can be applied to the construction of solid focus group research. The researcher can prepare a question schedule or a subject guide. The focus group can be formal, with the researcher asking one question at a time from each participant in the group. Such was the case in research conducted by Summer Harlow and Lei Guo (2014, 467–468), in which activists were asked the following concerning their use of digital media and technology: “1) How do you define activism? 2) What are the new technologies and tools you have used in your activist work? 3) Give an example of what worked well, what didn't work so well, and why? 4) How, if at all, would you say activism has changed because of digital tools?” The questions generated discussions between the different participants in the focus group, which was strictly moderated by Harlow and Guo as they made sure that each person was able to address the questions without interruption. Conversely, focus groups can be a large conversation that flows organically, wherein the researcher utilizes a subject guide to prompt participants and probe. The first is easier to control, while the latter can illuminate a plethora of topics and interrelationships that might not have been evident in one-on-one interviews. Many of the benefits of the approaches noted earlier apply to focus groups as well.

The focus group method of data collection can be employed for a variety of different purposes. One reason researchers often use focus groups rather than one-on-one interviews is time constraints; it can be difficult for researchers to meet individually with every single participant. Instead, they can go to a place where the participants regularly get together and conduct a group interview with the participants at that site. Focus groups can also be used for “brainstorming” purposes, which provide researchers with insight into an organization or community so that they may better structure their research questions and project (Fontana and Frey 2005; Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005). In addition, researchers can use focus groups in order to better comprehend group and organizational dynamics. By sitting down with several members of an organization, the researcher can often observe stark differences in the surface structures and deep structures play out as those members engage in conversation with the researcher and one another (see Giddens 1984; Heracleous and

Barrett 2001; Weick 1977). The surface structure consists of images and information that a group would want the public to see (e.g., an activist manifesto on a website), whereas the deep structure refers to those rituals and interactions that develop within the group over time (e.g., relying on specific individuals for information and leadership). For instance, P. Vigneswara Ilavarasan (2013) explored the role of ICTs in the activism of Indian youth groups. To this end, he conducted six focus group discussions in which activists were asked to talk about their views of civic engagement, their experiences with different political institutions, their use of ICTs, and how they viewed older generations' political engagement. Overall, the focus groups served a descriptive function, as the information from the discussions demonstrated that youth activists rarely used ICTs or mobile phones in their activism.

The focus group method also has potential drawbacks. The most notable problem with focus groups is the deep group structures noted earlier. Although the researcher can see those group dynamics play out, such dynamics may very well keep participants in the focus group from speaking up. In some instances, there are group members who have a tendency to control conversations and to push their own ideas; if this aspect of group dynamics enters into the focus group it can hinder the collection of data. Even if the participants in the focus group do not come from the same group or community, such commandeering roles may still develop within the focus group. The focus group is, after all, a temporary group subject to the same task, relational, and individual roles found in many small groups; individual roles are often adopted by members who seek to address their own needs and desires, often at the expense of the group (Wellen and Neale 2006). Whether problems come from deep structures of a group with whom the participants are affiliated or individual roles that develop in the focus group, the researcher should be prepared to interject throughout the focus group and give opportunities to more silent participants to speak up. This can be one of the more difficult aspects of qualitative work,

**Recap 3-2. Interviews and Focus Groups in Social Activism Research**

- Processes for collecting data:
  - Structured interview/focus group: Use of a rigid schedule of questions.
  - Ethnographic or unstructured interview/focus group: “Relaxed” conversations with participants based on a subject guide.
- Goals for data:
  - Descriptions of activism or phenomena: Accomplished through survey interviews that elicit specific information.
  - Co-construction of meaning: Accomplished through postmodern interviews that allow participants to weave narratives.

as the researcher must assume the role of mediator and actually step into conflicts with participants.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY AND FIELDWORK

Another important qualitative method available to researchers is ethnography. Unlike interviews and focus groups, ethnography cannot be divided into methodological positions. Ethnography, participant observation, and ethnographic narrative excavation are all utilized in scholarship that focuses on social construction, as these methods are integral for elucidating intersubjectivity and the co-construction of meaning within particular communities. Even though ethnography and other forms of fieldwork do not actually place researchers “into the shoes” of their participants and allow them to see the world through their eyes, these methods provide researchers with access to the world of their participants and allow them to gain firsthand experience within their participants’ communities. This is not to say that ethnographic methods are entirely closed off from positivist and post-positivist scholars in their research and fieldwork endeavors. Essentially, fieldwork like ethnography can function within the ontological and epistemological assumptions of positivism and post-positivism, or even provide additional insight following surveys or other such methods.

#### ETHNOGRAPHY AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Derived from the Latin term *ethno*, ethnography is primarily concerned with the experience of culture in the human world (Chambers 2000). According to George McCall (2006, 4), the ethnographic enterprise focuses on “documenting and illuminating some culturally embedded social system.” Ethnography itself is not a singular process or format but a combination of different methods at once within the context of a research site (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012; Lindlof and Taylor 2010). Participant observation is a typical action that is employed by researchers within ethnographic research, but interviews, conversations, and textual analysis can all come to bear in the investigation of a community or culture that is the subject of research. Participant observation within the context of ethnography enables researchers to do more than simply observe the culture of particular groups and communities; they gain the opportunity to actually immerse themselves within the complex minutiae of an organization or a community (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012; Chambers 2000; Denzin 1997; Lindlof and Taylor 2010). According to Anderson (1996, 178), “the researcher lives some part of the member life because the understandings that make it all sensible emerge in their enactments. It is a

localized, ongoing social construction of reality.” In this way, the researcher can actually see what it means to live and engage within such an organization or community. The researcher can understand the experiences that give rise to meaning-making and interpretation, and garner some insight into the construction of identity (Denzin 1997; McCall 2006).

As a method of inquiry, ethnography differs from interviews and focus groups as ethnographic researchers seek firsthand observation of lived experiences of the participants rather than learn about those experiences through narratives and stories. Essentially, researchers place themselves into the world of the participants in order to actually observe the participants’ and their culture in action.

Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context. It is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives. (Tedlock 2000, 455)

Much of what researchers can observe through this method is often taken for granted by the participants and subsequently left out of narratives and stories that emerge from interviews and focus groups. To be sure, there is an interviewing process that goes on as researchers engage in their project; they speak with people in the community and with people who have knowledge about that community. However, the ethnographic process demands that researchers observe what is going on around them and what is happening to them when they step into the world and community of the participants. In addition to observing what goes on within the research site, researchers may also engage in participant observation; they may engage in actions and rituals that are common to the participants’ community. In order to gain insight and understanding about a culture, organization, or community, it is vital that researchers engage in the ethnography for a protracted period of time; researchers must “live intimately inside the life space of the cultural members” (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, 17). Essentially, ethnography demands that researchers be immersed not only in the community or culture (almost) every day but also to the point that they feel they have gained a full understanding of the participants’ environment. Although there are no criteria for how much time this would take, it is generally understood that in order to achieve such immersion

researchers must be in the field for at least one to two years (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012; Chambers 2000; Denzin 1997; Lindlof and Taylor 2010). The enormous demands for time and effort often dissuade many researchers from engaging in such a method. Nevertheless, ethnography and participant observation are excellent means for examining activist organizations and communities.

According to Erve Chambers (2000), Barbara Tedlock (2000), and McCall (2006), the ethnographic enterprise is focused on laying bare and illustrating experiences and practices within a culture or community that aid in the co-construction of meaning. In this way, ethnography stands as a good method for the examination of social activism, as activists routinely engage in the construction of meanings that stand outside of those of dominant power structures in society. Whereas interviews or focus groups alone can provide the researcher with insight into the intertwined relationships within activist organizations and communities, ethnography allows researchers to observe and take part in the specific processes of meaning-making, as well as the emergent socially constructed reality. Researchers stand to discover many of the taken-for-granted nuances within organizations and communities that are often overlooked and ignored by activists in their responses to questions in stand-alone interviews. Ethnographic research allows for a more thorough investigation of organizations and communities that are constructed from meanings and interpretations that give rise to resistance or defiance.

For instance, Christina Dunbar-Hester's (2012) research concerning radio activism serves as a valuable example of ethnography and participant observation in activist research. For her project, Dunbar-Hester volunteered to work with a pirate radio collective in Philadelphia from 2004–2007. From 2004 to 2005, her work with the group was as a volunteer within the main offices of the collective. As a volunteer, Dunbar-Hester participated in operating the radio station and coordinating content. Her volunteer work allowed her to observe and take part in interactions that were taking place between the Philadelphia collective and other pirate radio groups, which also allowed her to gather information concerning those groups as well. From 2005 to 2006, she “pulled back” from the volunteer work to engage in fieldwork and make observations of special events such as protests. These activities, as well as her interactions with other members, provided insight into the organizational culture of the pirate radio collective. Ultimately, she found that the members of the collective constructed a “technical identity” that was based on the activists’ work with the radio and ICT technology that they utilized in their endeavors. This identity helped the group to feel distinct from other activists who worked with other forms of media in their endeavors.



Outstanding ethnography requires that researchers commit to spending months or even years with the participants in their communities (see Chambers 2000). Sometimes, however, the enormous time requirements of the ethnographic method cannot be met; not because of the commitments or abilities of the researcher, but because of the duration of the event or community that is the subject of study. In many cases, events take place for a limited amount of time, or temporary communities come together for the purpose of addressing a specific short-term goal and then disperse. In order to study such events or communities, researchers can use ethnographic narrative excavation. Robert Krizek (2003) developed this form of ethnography for the excavation and representation of narratives from participants of nonroutine public events. Nonroutine public events are those important social occasions, spectacles, and ceremonies that are notable because of their connection to major social institutions (Dayan and Katz 1992; Turner 1981). The funeral of former President Gerald Ford or Glenn Beck's Restoring Honor political rally in Washington, DC, constitute nonroutine public events. In both cases, the events take place in the public and are associated with major institutions in American society. Because of the magnitude of these social events, the media elites often define the experiences of those events for people (Zelizer 1993). The excavation of narratives from people or groups at a short-term event provides researchers with a way to "see the event more clearly as [participants] place [the event] within the context of their lives" (Krizek 2003, 143). For Krizek, the excavation of narratives from participants at these public events provides the opportunity to reconstruct and understand the event outside of the authorship of media elites. Essentially, the method functions in many ways like an ethnography, only within the context of a shorter timeframe. During the nonroutine public event, the researcher can engage in conversations with people in attendance, make observations, and even participate in activities associated with the event. By engaging in these actions, the researcher can collect data that can prove useful in theory development.

Ethnographic narrative excavation stands as a solid method for the examination of activist protests or events, as such actions are typically short in duration. Many actions or events that are recognized as "activism" occur within a short timespan or protest communities that Best (2005) describes as "temporary." As noted earlier, interviews and focus groups can provide valuable insight into such actions, but there can be taken-for-granted cultural or organizational practices that are overlooked. When researchers engage in ethnographic narrative excavation, they step into the event and conduct interviews and participant observation, as well as take field notes and engage in textual analysis. Such an approach to the study of activist actions and events can illuminate many of

the complex nuances and provide a richer understanding of the role of such actions in intersubjective meaning-making, interpretive processes, and the social construction of reality. For example, I used ethnographic narrative excavation in order to study an activist “Truth Excursion” to Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas, Mexico (Atkinson 2009b). The journey to Chiapas was orchestrated by an American activist network as an initiative to put northern activists into contact with southern activists in Central and South America. Because of the duration of the journey (less than two weeks), ethnography, as described here, was not a viable method to examine the event. Instead, I used ethnographic narrative excavation: I recorded the oral histories presented to the members of the Truth Excursion by Zapatista leaders and engaged in conversations with those members at the onset and end of the journey. By engaging in this qualitative method, I was able to demonstrate how the activists used conceptualizations of resistance in their white, middle-class communities (e.g., boycotting Wal-Mart or buying environmentally friendly clothing) to make sense of resistance in the poor Zapatista communities of Southern Mexico (e.g., blocking highways).

#### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ONLINE

As many activist organizations, networks, and actions are increasingly Internet oriented, it is vital that researchers be prepared to conduct their research online. On the surface, conducting research online is fairly comparable to research in face-to-face settings. However, as the previous chapter demonstrated, activism online can be conceptualized differently from activism in person, and the anonymity of the Internet can create unique ethical problems for gaining consent and confidentiality. Similarly, the online setting can significantly impact the way in which a researcher actually carries out his or her chosen qualitative methods. In some respects, there are enormous benefits to conducting research within online environments. Most notably, the physical distance between the researcher and participants can reduce tensions and help the participants to feel at ease. According to Nicola Illingsworth (2001, ¶ 9.5), computer-mediated communication allows for disembodiment of both the researcher and participant, which “dilutes the effects of power relations within the setting.” Essentially, researchers are typically in a position of power, in which they control the questions and tempo of any interactions, as well as information conveyed by the participants and their anonymity. Research online helps to mitigate that power by creating for the participant a perceived distance from the research; such distance provides participants with a sense of control over the situation. Conducting research online can be valuable for research projects as such work often entails working with the participant to create frameworks for soliciting

narratives and tapping into knowledge, such as in the case of postmodern interviewing. This also has enormous value for studies that explore social activism as participants are often acutely aware of the power dynamics and are often resistant to such power.

Despite these benefits, there are notable limitations. The most obvious limitations are associated with the medium of communication between the researcher and participants. Social media, e-mail, chat rooms, video chat apps (such as Skype), and instant messaging apps are all media that have been utilized in order to connect the researcher with participants in interviews and focus groups. Each of these media falls under one of two communication categories, synchronous (chat rooms and video chat and instant messaging apps) and asynchronous (social media, e-mail, and listservs). Synchronous interviews and focus groups through interactive media, such as Skype, involve all of the parties taking part in the dialogue at the same time; asynchronous communication is sporadic, with one party making a statement (i.e., sending an e-mail) and awaiting a response from another party. In qualitative research through synchronous communication, it is important to remember that participants' feedback tokens (frowning of the brow, eye contact, hand gestures) might not be accessible; a researcher might not see hand gestures in an interview conducted via Skype. By missing important feedback, the researcher may not recognize when a participant does not understand a question, or is troubled by a particular question. Asynchronous interviews and focus groups can be even more daunting, as the sporadic communication between researcher and participants can take much more time than face-to-face or synchronous communication online; in some cases, an interview or focus group can take months (Rezabek 2000). The enormous time requirements and the gaps in communication between researcher and participants can lead to participant attrition. The loss of participants can be problematic for interviews, forcing the researcher to frequently recruit new participants in order to substitute those who dropped out or did not complete interviews. The loss of participants from the asynchronous mode of communication can be especially devastating for focus groups; as members of online focus groups disappear the nature of the group, as well as the information that could potentially be gleaned from the method, can change.

In addition, qualitative research—typically ethnographic research—has been used for twenty years to explore and understand so-called online communities. Even though these communities are referred to as online or virtual, researchers must establish the proper boundaries that define the communities under investigation. As Christine Hine, Lori Kendall, and Danah Boyd (2009) point out, so-called online communities exist both on- and offline. Despite the fact that the “action” of the community and the communication between community members may take place through online forums or environments, those com-

munity members lead offline lives as well; the members sit at their computers, they go to work, they interact with people around them. Where does the community begin and end? They note that these boundaries may be temporal or spatial and describe the presence of relational boundaries between members. Ultimately, the researcher must decide which boundaries are pertinent to the research. Spatial boundaries refer to the interactions between community members' offline, as well as the role of the community in members' interactions with the world outside of the virtual community. Whenever spatial boundaries are integral to a project, researchers should be committed to collecting data concerning participants' interactions and actions offline in addition to their exploration of the online environment (Orgrad 2009). Temporal boundaries denote the time available to the researcher to conduct the study, as well as the amount of time that a community will exist (some online communities come together around specific issues or events such as an election). Relational boundaries involve the "relationships between researchers and the people they study" (Hine, Kendall, and Boyd 2009, 22); the researcher's ability to build and cultivate relationships with members of a community constitutes this particular boundary. Once these boundaries have been identified, researchers should become familiar with the software utilized to facilitate the online community. They should also seek to understand any cultural rules that exist within the community that dictate how the software is used to interact with others, such as good avatar development or communication etiquette (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor 2012).

J. Patrick Biddix and Han Woo Park (2008) provide a good example of qualitative research conducted online in their examination of a student protest that advocated for a living wage for the janitorial staff at Harvard University. The researchers engaged in electronic interviews with ten activists who were affiliated with a variety of different student groups. Biddix and Park identified groups that were particularly prominent in sending out e-materials and linking their websites to other organizations. Representatives of seven of the prominent organizations were interviewed using an instant messaging app or e-mail; three other participants were recruited through snow-ball sampling of the original seven activists. Their research, which also included a content analysis

### **Reap 3-3. Important Points about Qualitative Research Online**

- Understand communication and feedback limitations associated with key media involved in online environments.
- Understand the temporal, spatial, and relational boundaries of the online community.

of hyperlinked websites, demonstrates crucial challenges that were faced by activists in the online protest community.

#### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Textual analysis involves gathering information about texts in order to gain insight about their role in society or communities (McKee 2003). Researchers can explore and examine texts in a variety of ways: qualitative content analysis and rhetorical criticism are two methods that I will cover here. Given that both of these methods focus on the construction of meaning and are guided in large part by the ontological view that texts play a vital role in the social construction of reality, these are methods that are strictly utilized by scholars who are grounded in methodological positions that focus on social construction. Qualitative content analysis is a method used by researchers in order to uncover meanings embedded within a text; the focus of such research is often latent, or underlying, meanings (Altheide and Schneider 2013; Krippendorff 2012; Mayring 2000; Schreier 2012). Conversely, rhetorical criticism is more of an interpretation of a text and explanation about how it should be understood (Foss 2004; Herrick 2012; Stone 1988). Put another way, qualitative content analysis explains what is in a text, whereas rhetorical criticism explains how it should be read and comprehended within a larger social context.

#### QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

Qualitative content analysis is an alternative to the more common quantitative content analysis; the latter of which focuses on frequencies of themes or terms that are found in a sample of texts. The goal of quantitative content analysis is to uncover manifest meanings within a text. Manifest meanings are those concrete terms that are defined and established at the onset of research, or themes that are composed of such concrete terms (Roberts 1997; Stone 1997). Essentially, the researcher looks for certain terms or themes within a text, counts the number of instances in which those terms or themes emerge, and utilizes statistical analysis (usually chi-square) to discover if the recurring use of terms or themes is significant (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998); such significance helps the researcher to identify any rules or patterns in the usage of terms or themes (Krippendorff 2012). In contrast, the rationale behind qualitative content analysis is to uncover any underlying meanings found in a text that cannot be found through the counting of themes or terms (Krippendorff 2012). Merely counting a theme or term, as in quantitative content analysis, is not enough to understand any latent patterns developed within texts. Essentially, researchers

utilize qualitative content analysis in order to uncover any underlying meanings that are conveyed through the text.

Qualitative content analysis is typically accomplished through one of two processes: a close reading of relevant materials by the researcher and the use of coders. In the first case, the researcher essentially reads each text and notes important elements that fit preexisting categories or elements that might give rise to emergent categories (Altheide and Schneider 2013; Krippendorff 2012). The act of engaging in the reading alone can make for relatively quick and efficient qualitative content analysis. However, this process of qualitative content analysis has two serious flaws: researchers may miss important details, or their agenda or research questions may skew their observations. To remedy these flaws, researchers may enlist the aid of additional “coders” in their analysis of texts. The use of coders can be advantageous, as the researcher can demonstrate that multiple readers arrived at similar conclusions. In order to effectively use coders, however, the researcher must be able to establish intercoder reliability, which demonstrates that the researcher and coders in fact came to the same conclusions (Neuendorf 2002). To establish intercoder reliability, the researcher first needs to thoroughly train the coders about the reading process: What categories will they be searching for in the content as they engage in the reading? What elements should they be searching for within the texts? Such training is essential, otherwise the researcher and coders may very well look for vastly different things within the text; the results would be skewed. Once the coders have been trained, they may conduct their reading. The results of the reading and coding are brought together for comparison, at which point intercoder reliability is determined. A typical method for the establishment of intercoder reliability is the use of Holsti’s formula, in which the researcher divides the number of agreed-upon codes by the number of total coding decisions; if the rate of agreement is higher than 80 percent, then acceptable intercoder reliability has been achieved (Holsti 1969; Poindexter and McCombs 2000).

Phillip Mayring (2000) explains that qualitative content analysis is an important tool available to researchers so that they might untangle the concrete and underlying meanings that govern rules, patterns, and relationships within texts. He claims that there are two modes for the application of qualitative content analysis: deductive category application and inductive category development. The deductive category analysis is similar to Margrit Schreier’s (2012) mode of qualitative content analysis, which has roots in discourse analysis. In this deductive form of qualitative content analysis, the researcher uses categorical frames that have been prepared prior to the analysis in order to examine a text; the goal is to search for elements of a text that can fit within

the preexisting categories or frames. These categories are not concrete terms, as described earlier in reference to quantitative content analysis. Instead, the researcher develops categories that can emerge in a variety of different ways. For instance, a researcher could search for “activism” within a particular text. Activism is not clearly defined by any one term or set of terms and can be understood in different forms (e.g., street protest, culture jamming, hacking, wearing T-shirts with political messages); as demonstrated in chapter 2, there are different ways of conceptualizing activism. The researchers could utilize a definition of activism as a frame to use to seek out examples of activism within a text; a frame constructed from the methodological position of dialectics or phenomenology would provide some parameters, but would also be quite broad. The researcher, or trained coders, can read throughout various texts, looking for forms of activism that fit within the particular frame established at the onset of the project. As the text is examined, readers can identify and note instances of activism within the text. The readers do not merely count the number of times that the category emerges within the text, but examine how the category is utilized. In the “activism” example, one or more readers could note forms of activism evoked within the text, as well as the tone and language use around those forms. The readers could also note the uses of characters or settings used in the descriptions of activism. Ultimately, the frame provides multiple examples of activism that exist within the text; the reading and use of the frame allow for latent meanings to emerge. The researcher can examine those examples to find meanings associated with activism through forms, descriptions, tone, and other uses of language within the text.

My work with Rosati (Atkinson and Rosati 2012) provides an example of the deductive approach to qualitative content analysis. In our research concerning the online community that reimagined the cityscape of Detroit (see chapter 2), we combed through numerous posts on the group’s discussion forum. To facilitate our reading of the texts, we utilized topographical categories developed by William Sadler and Ekaterina Haskins (2005): landmarks, districts, nodes, pathways, and edges. Essentially, as we read through the discussion threads, we looked for discussions about the city and whether comments or materials applied to any of the five topographical categories. Any topographical categories that were identified in the discussion forum threads were recorded and examined: “In our qualitative content analysis, we constructed an Excel spreadsheet in which we listed the topographical categories that we discovered. We noted how the different topographical categories were depicted in photographs and narratives provided by [the web administrator] in the virtual tour, as well as through stories, anecdotes, and attachments (e.g., YouTube videos, MapQuest references) provided by users in 162 of the threads posted on the

[forums]” (Atkinson and Rosati 2012, 7–8). By identifying the topographical categories discussed by members of the online community and examining their depictions, we were able to reveal embedded meanings about the cityscape that were being co-constructed. The cityscape that emerged from the forum looked considerably different from the bleak place depicted in mainstream news and entertainment media.

Linda Kenix (2009) provides good examples of the different forms of qualitative content analysis; her research concerning political blogs utilized multiple forms of content analysis. Kenix argues that political blogs should be considered to be alternative media, which, in turn, necessitates some reconceptualization of that concept. Part of her research utilizes quantitative content analysis and statistical analysis. Other aspects of her research entail deductive qualitative analysis as well as the inductive mode. Kenix starts by identifying different popular political blogs through the use of a memetracker called Tailrank (see chapter 7). Once the popular blogs had been identified, Kenix engaged in a deductive category application in order to classify their connections to other websites. In the appendix of her article, she identifies the criteria for each of the categories that she applied:

#### **Coding Categories for Hyperlinks**

Itself: Hyperlink to another location within the same blog site.

Apparent like-minded blog: Hyperlink to another blog that appears to be of the same ideological position as the blog sampled. Given that all of the blogs sampled for this study self-identified as liberal, “like-minded” blogs were also liberal.

Apparent opposite-minded blog: Hyperlink to another blog that appears to be of the opposite ideological position as the blog sampled. Given that all of the blogs sampled for this study self-identified as liberal, “opposite-minded” blogs were conservative.

Blog with unknown political position: Hyperlink to another blog that does not appear to be conservative or liberal.

Mainstream news source: Hyperlink to a professional news website that is generally in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges institutions over movements and relies on sources according to perceived credibility.

Mainstream news blog: Hyperlink to a professional news blog that is generally in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges institutions over movements and relies on sources according to perceived credibility.



Alternative news source: Hyperlink to a news website that is generally not in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges movements over institutions and relies on sources throughout the broader community.

Alternative news blog: Hyperlink to a news blog that is generally not in pursuit of commercial, for profit, objectives as the motivation for publication; privileges movements over institutions and relies on sources throughout the broader community.

Mainstream pop culture source: Hyperlink to a popular, nonnews source that contributes to common culture.

Nonprofit organization: Hyperlink to a nonnews organization that does not aim to make any financial profit and serves the broader community.

Petition: Hyperlink to an online petition.

Personal website: Hyperlink to a nonnews and nonprofessional website constructed by an individual.

Government: Hyperlink to a government website.

Other: Hyperlink to a website that does not warrant inclusion into any of the aforementioned categories. (Kenix 2009, 821–822)

Kenix searched through the different websites that were hyperlinked to the popular political blogs identified through Tailrank. In each instance, she verified whether the content of the blog fit within any of the categories that she noted in her appendix. The results from this deductive analysis were subsequently the basis for her quantitative and statistical content analysis.

In contrast, Mayring (2000) claims that inductive category development is used for the purpose of forming categories that adhere to criteria that emerge from the theoretical background of the research project, or from the research questions that are guiding a study. The mode of inductive category development is closely aligned with David Altheide and Christopher Schneider's (2013) ethnographic content analysis. Inductive category development involves the examination of texts in an effort to discern narrative components such as situation, setting, characters, style, or themes that are related to theories or research questions (Altheide and Schneider 2013; Krippendorff 2012; Mayring 2000). As significant components are identified, the researcher develops categories, often through the process of constant comparison; that is, the researcher compares significant components to see if they are similar. If the components display similarities they are placed into the same category; if not, they are separated. As categories emerge and are refined, some components can be moved from one category to another. The development of categories can reveal underlying mean-

ings throughout a text or a series of texts. This process of analysis, more than deductive category application, is significantly different from quantitative content analysis because there is little or no reliance on frequencies of themes or terms found throughout selected texts. In order to carry out this process, Mayring prescribes that each researcher should decide on a criterion for the establishment and development of categories before they engage in their analysis. Any criteria should be based on one of the following: the initial research questions, theories from past research, or the nature of the study. The established criterion, no matter its basis, guides the examination of the texts and the development of categories. The categories take shape and are fleshed out through rereading and reexamining the emergent categories. Ultimately, Mayring notes that the process for this inductive approach is up to the discretion of the researcher, as they will take the steps that work best within the framework of their study and the texts under examination.

As noted earlier, Kenix's (2009) research concerning political blogs entailed both deductive and inductive analysis. In addition to the application of categories to hyperlinks found on the political blogs, she also utilizes an inductive form of analysis to examine the narratives used within those blogs; this was done so that she could determine if they were "alternative." Kenix describes this component of her research as "an organic exploration of narrative" (797). Essentially, she read through numerous blog posts utilizing the guiding research question as a framework for developing categories; Kenix notes that this reading entailed "a loose, preconceived idea of the discursive elements that may exist in the content" (797) that would highlight important narratives. Ultimately, Kenix's content analysis supported her argument that political blogs should be considered to be a form of alternative media.

#### **Recap 3-4. Qualitative Content Analysis in Social Activism Research**

- Processes:
  - Close reading by the researcher alone.
  - Close reading with the help of coders; establishment of intercoder reliability with Holsti's formula.
- Modes of application:
  - Deductive category application.
  - Inductive category development.

#### **RHETORICAL CRITICISM**

The rhetorical tradition developed out of the ancient debates between Plato and sophists such as Gorgias, as well as Aristotle's *The Rhetoric*. The former

focused on the nature of rhetoric as Plato argued that only certain elites or philosophers should use rhetoric to lead people to universal Truths, whereas the sophists argued that truth was subjective and dependent on interpretation (Herrick 2012; Stone 1988). Later, Aristotle established a grammar for discussing rhetoric, classifying proofs (logical, emotional) and rhetorical settings (forensic, deliberative, epideictic) (Herrick 2012; McCroskey 2005). The works of rhetorical practitioners such as Cicero, Quintilian, Augustine of Hippo, George Campbell, Hugh Blair, Richard Whately, and others followed meditations of the ancient Greek philosophers. All of these early works set the stage for neo-Aristotelian criticism, a form of rhetorical criticism that was initially used in the examination of delivery and content of speeches. Essentially, under neo-Aristotelian criticism, the researcher examines the proofs, or evidence, that are brought to bear within a speech, as well as the organization of those proofs and the style of delivery (Brock, Scott, and Chesebro 1990; Foss 2004). The researcher engages in a close reading of the texts under examination, searching for proofs and style as units of analysis; those units of analysis are used to make an argument for how others should understand the role of the text within larger social arguments or the social construction of reality. Although this method has been primarily used to examine speeches, some rhetorical scholars have broadened neo-Aristotelian criticism to explore proofs and style in other texts. For instance, Kendall Phillips (2005) has used this form of criticism to examine horror films and their role in American culture. Searching for proofs embedded in movies such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, he argues that filmmakers such as Tobe Hooper reflect the fears of American society at the time they produced their films. Certain scenes, actions, and stylistic approaches to filmmaking constitute proofs to the audience that some social problems are threatening American society and culture.

Beginning in the middle of the twentieth century, the scope of rhetorical criticism expanded dramatically because of the work of scholars such as Kenneth Burke, Walter Fisher, Michael McGee, and Maurice Charland. These extensions of rhetoric are in no way mutually exclusive from the neo-Aristotelian form of criticism noted earlier. Many rhetorical scholars who employ neo-Aristotelian criticism also use concepts of dramatism, narrative paradigm, ideograph, and constitutive rhetoric that are associated with the expansion of rhetoric in the twentieth century. Burke (1945) revolutionized the rhetorical tradition with his concept of dramatization, which incorporated a Shakespearian approach to rhetoric by treating rhetorical acts like performances that can be witnessed in plays. Essentially, Burke noted that rhetors—like actors in a play—attempt to build identification with others through their rhetoric, as well as create a strategy for those people to deal with situations around them; the rhetor ultimately wants others to adopt their position. The language that is

used builds identification and creates strategic “equipment for living,” which provides insight about the rhetor. Sonja Foss (2004, 71) elaborates on this equipment for living: “The terms we select to describe the world constitute a kind of screen that directs attention to particular aspects of reality rather than others. Our particular vocabularies constitute a reflection, selection, and deflection of reality. . . . From the infinite terms available to rhetors, they put together components of rhetoric in a way that reflects who they are, the subjects about which they are engrossed, and the meanings they have for those subjects.” For Burke, language—whether used in a speech, a film, or a song—builds a vision that focuses on some characteristics of the world, while filtering out others.

Fisher (1984; 1985) similarly extended the rhetorical tradition through his narrative paradigm. According to Fisher, people build their communities through narratives; stories create meaning about different aspects of the world. The different narrative components (e.g., characters, actions, settings, temporal arrangement) serve as a lens through which people view and experience the world; narratives shape the interpretive process. For example, the stories told by fans of a particular football team about the team and its history shape the way in which they see and experience the sport as it unfolds on the field: It is unclear what really happened in the infamous “immaculate reception” that ended the 1972 playoff game between the Oakland Raiders and the Pittsburgh Steelers, as the limited photographs and film footage of the event cannot accurately identify who touched the ball thrown by Steelers quarterback Terry Bradshaw first (Raider linebacker Jack Tatum or Steeler receiver Lynn Swann). The implications for who touched the ball were enormous, for if the Raider player touched the ball first the immaculate reception was a legal play and the Steelers won the game, whereas if the Steeler player touched the ball first the reception was illegal and the Raiders won the game. As nobody can truly ever know who touched the ball first, the narratives about their teams in the two fan communities shaped the way in which they interpreted and experienced the event. In another example, many media outlets described the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, as a modern-day “Pearl Harbor”; the narrative of the Japanese surprise attack on the US naval base in Hawaii shaped the way in which people experienced, and later remembered, the horror of the terrorist attack.

McGee (1975; 1980a) further developed the rhetorical tradition by exploring the concept of the ideograph. According to McGee, certain groups utilize ideologies in society in order to hold sway over people; this is accomplished through the manipulation of ideographs. The ideograph is a term that refers to abstract political concepts, such as *liberty* or *equality*. As such terms do not exist as concrete manifestations, like the terms *carrot* or *train*, they can mean different things to different people. However, the use of ideographs can create a

sense of shared meaning and understanding of the world; using abstract terms such as *liberty* as if everyone understands it the same way creates the sense that everyone is in agreement about certain principles necessary for society. The construction of such a perception of shared meaning is a powerful tool for persuading people to accept particular political positions that they might otherwise reject.

These concepts of identification—equipment for living, narrative, and ideograph—gave rise to the concept of constitutive rhetoric, which was first articulated by James White (1985) and later developed by Charland (1987). According to Charland, rhetoric calls a particular audience into being by helping to establish identity; rhetoric “hails” the audience and brings them into discourse with others or calls on them to take a particular action. Whether the audience engages in the political discourse or action is dependent on whether they accept the identity that is established for them through the rhetorical artifact.

Rhetorical criticism has served as a valuable tool for the examination and exploration of social activism. For instance, Jennifer Peeples (2011) notes how the terms *downwind* and *downwinder* became ideographs through the campaigns of environmental activists. She examined newspaper reports and other discourse concerning the establishment of a waste incineration plant in Spokane, Washington, in the 1980s. Specifically, Peeples searched for the use of this nautical term as a metaphor for the spread of toxins from industrial sites into the environment. She found that the activists who fought against the incineration plant often utilized the concept of “downwind” in order to portray the proposed plant as dangerous to the city of Spokane. Although the activists lost the debate, they were successful in articulating a term that combined toxins, victims, and physical site. In turn, other environmental and antitoxin activist groups appropriated the term *downwind* in their own campaigns, establishing the term as an ideograph. This abstraction was used to create a sense of shared meaning about impending danger, but also helped to hail audiences into environmental debates that they would have otherwise ignored. Similarly, West (2007) used rhetorical criticism to explore facets of feminist and LGBT activism. In his study, West explores cookbooks that were produced by a Los Angeles area “maternal pacifist” group called WISP (Women Strike for Peace) during the Vietnam War. In his close reading of the cookbooks he searched for recipes and stories that were grounded in ideological assumptions associated with feminism and feminist critiques of patriarchy; specifically, West focuses on elements in the cookbooks that address the gendered logic of warfare. This search reveals the ways in which feminist activism and pacifism could effectively extend into the home and shape political identity through the activities of everyday life.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, the different methods presented here constitute tools and processes that are available to the researcher. My own experiences have taught me that different qualitative methods can be conceptualized like a worker’s toolbox. Whenever I focus on alternative media text, I typically reach for qualitative content analysis. Whenever I focus on activist networks, I use interviews. Whenever one tool does not work, I simply reach into my repertoire and retrieve one that helps me to accomplish my goals. For instance, I conducted research that was designed to compare and contrast Tea Party activism with the anti–Iraq War activism that I had studied in the past. The Tea Party activists whom I tried to recruit viewed me as a socialist agitator who would likely report his findings directly to Democratic Party leadership, or twist their words into silly quotes that would make their endeavors look negative in the middle of an election year. When I did get a chance to conduct interviews or focus groups, I found that those activists tended to give me partial information with no elaboration and would refuse to answer any follow-up questions. In addition, I discovered that four activists with whom I conducted a focus group deliberately provided false or misleading information. When I figured this out and asked them about it, they simply told me that they were “doing what they do.” Ultimately, I had to give up on the interviews and focus groups. Given the partial and dubious information, there was little I would be able to glean from any analysis. With that, I then switched to qualitative content analysis of alternative media used by Tea Party activists in the region. In each case, whether using one research tool or switching between multiple tools, my methodological foundations aided in determining how those tools were utilized.

Recap 3-5. Traditions of Rhetorical Criticism	
Tradition	Description
Neo-Aristotelian criticism	Examines proofs used in argumentation.
Dramatism	Uncovers uses of language that provide insight into rhetors’ motivations.
Narrative paradigm	Relates the narratives that shape worldviews and perceptions.
Ideograph	Explores abstract ideological concepts used in media or other texts.
Constitutive rhetoric	Uses one of the traditions here to demonstrate how messages shape identity and hail audiences into discourse.

According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002, 209), data are “textual, aural, and/or visual records of the object and process of research activity.” Essentially, the records of a researcher’s interactions with the participants of a study constitute the data. The researcher then uses this information for one or both of the following purposes: description or building and expanding theory. The process of using data to reach one of these two goals can be difficult, however, as the researcher can have hundreds of pages of transcriptions, along with a plethora of field notes and texts. All of this information can be overwhelming before the process of analysis has even started. According to A. Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles (1998), researchers should work through their vast collection of data in three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The first step is directly related to the management of data, while the other two are associated with analysis.

Good data management starts with data reduction. According to Huberman and Miles, this step does not begin after the data have been collected, but rather at the inception of the research project: “The entire universe of data is reduced in an anticipatory way as the researcher chooses a conceptual framework, research questions, cases, and instruments. Once actual field notes, interviews, tapes, or other data are available, data summaries, coding, finding themes, clustering, and writing stories are all instances of further data selection and condensation” (Huberman and Miles 1998, 180). Essentially, the research questions and guiding theories developed at the onset of a project should help the researcher to begin the process of reducing data. Concepts and ideas outside of the research questions and theoretical framework will almost certainly arise in interviews and ethnographic endeavors. Nevertheless, such concepts should be recorded and filed away for future research projects; staying focused on pertinent matters is of utmost importance when reducing data. After researchers begin to collect data, they should also engage in various activities to organize the information for storage and future retrieval. Specifically, Huberman and Miles recommend that researchers write data summaries after interviews, type hand-written field notes, and cluster interviews or observations into groupings based on similarity. Ultimately, researchers can document themes or categories as they see them emerge during data collection, and they can write stories about the qualitative research experience to help keep track of important details.

In addition to the ideas for data reduction, Lindlof and Taylor (2010) also provide valuable suggestions for the management of data. They suggest that the researcher utilize asides, commentary, and in-process memos. Asides are brief analytical writing—often a few words or sentences in a notebook or in the margins of field notes—written down to connect concepts that emerge through

interviews or fieldwork. These notes are the first step in conducting analysis and should be edited and typed as soon as possible so as to preserve any important ideas. Like asides, commentaries are notes written down during or shortly after observations are made or interviews are concluded. Commentaries are more complex, however, as they constitute a longer reflection on connections between interviews or observations in the field, as well as connections between those data and theories or concepts. As with asides, researchers should quickly edit and type the commentaries for later use. Finally, the in-process memo is not simply a set of notes written down during or shortly after interviews or observations, but rather lengthy discussions written by researchers after they have had time to review asides, commentaries, transcripts, and other research materials. The in-process memo typically focuses on emergent concepts, themes, or categories and explores them in-depth. All of these forms of data reduction help to consolidate the information that is gleaned from numerous interviews or focus groups and days, weeks, or months of observations in the field. This also proves to be an enormous aid to the process of data analysis, as some of the work of building categories or developing themes will actually begin with data reduction. If researchers neglect to engage in this kind of data management, they can become overwhelmed and disoriented, which will make for a weak start to the process of data analysis later.

Data analysis may begin with the process of reduction, but is manifest most strongly in Huberman and Miles's (1998) data display, as well as conclusion drawing. Data display becomes possible when the researcher sees "a reduced set of data as a basis for thinking about meanings" (180). Essentially, researchers compile important concepts or examples gleaned from qualitative methods so that they may easily review those materials and search for potential connections. Drawing conclusions is the point at which researchers make interpretations based on the data that have been reduced and displayed. At this point, researchers engage in some mode of analysis in order to provide descriptions of meaning or phenomenon, build new theories, or expand existing theories. Researchers have many methods for drawing conclusions from the data at their disposal; thematic analysis, grounded theory analysis, and fantasy theme analysis are but a few methods to consider for drawing conclusions from data. The mode of analysis often depends on the goals of the research project. Descriptive projects typically use thematic analysis or similar modes of analysis such as fantasy theme analysis, while those projects that seek to build or expand theories typically employ grounded theory analysis.

The goal of thematic analysis is to identify broad patterns of meaning that exist within the data (Guest 2012; Saldana 2009). Researchers examine materials that they have gathered (e.g., transcripts, media texts, or field notes) in an effort to find categorical meanings that arise across most, if not all, of the



materials; these categories represent overarching themes across the data. Once researchers have identified the themes, they search for broad patterns: Do the themes repeat in particular ways? Do certain individuals bring up those themes? Do different people discuss those themes in different ways? This enables researchers to provide a rich description of meaning and meaning patterns within data. Similarly, fantasy theme analysis seeks out meaning usage within data, but also explores the functions of those meanings within larger worldviews. The notion of a fantasy theme is built on the concept of symbolic convergence (Bales 1970; Bormann 1972; 1982; Bormann, Cragan, and Shields 1994), which can demonstrate intersubjective meaning within and between groups. Essentially, people in groups weave fantasies about outside settings, characters, or actions to make sense of situations in the here and now. Convergence occurs as the group members begin to focus on similar, outside fantasies to explain the issues facing the group; this leads to a shared rhetorical vision of the situation. The term fantasy is a reference to stories, anecdotes, or hypothetical situations woven by a person. In fantasy theme analysis, researchers look for the characteristics of stories that are passed around a community or culture; characters, settings, and actions can all be characteristics of those stories (Foss 2004). Researchers then try to identify which characters, settings, or actions are used—or “chained”—again and again by other people or groups. For example, a researcher may be interested in the ways in which activists discuss corporations, and the data may reveal certain characters or settings present in the stories told by a multitude of activists. Those characters or settings constitute fantasy themes that have chained from one activist, or group of activists, to another. Once a series of fantasy themes are manifest across a community or culture, they are deemed to be the basis for a rhetorical vision, or shared worldview. Essentially, researchers use fantasy theme analysis to search through the data to find common fantasy themes and the convergence of a shared worldview.

Whereas the previous examples of modes of data analysis and drawing conclusions focuses on describing meaning patterns and structures, other modes of analysis build or expand theory. Grounded theory analysis is one mode of analysis that accomplishes this goal. According to Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2007) grounded theory is a method of theory development using the data as a basis; the data collection, data analysis, and final refined theory are in close relationship. Researchers go through the grounded theory process to flesh out the structure and the processes of a phenomenon in order to construct a conceptual framework, or to build or expand an already existing framework. This is accomplished through an ongoing interplay between researchers and data that is often referred to as the constant comparative method, in which

researchers draw comparisons between multiple data starting during the data collection phase all the way through to the development of the final theory (Corbin and Strauss 2007; Glaser 1978; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The process of grounded theory data analysis proceeds in three concurrent phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin and Strauss 2007). These concurrent phases can actually begin and take place as the data is being collected, as researchers will often begin to see connections as they move from one participant to others in interviews, meet and converse with new individuals within an ethnographic project, or jot down asides or commentary in the margins via data reduction. No matter when or how the process actually begins, it is important to note that the phases are concurrent and do not take place in a neat and tidy fashion. Open coding involves the development of categories from the data gathered, similar to thematic analysis discussed earlier. Axial coding is a reference to the conceptualization of interrelationships between these different categories, typically by the development of dimensions for those categories identified through open coding. For instance, a researcher might notice that all activists hold critical worldviews about power structures in society in the process of open coding; this would constitute a category developed through open coding. Through axial coding, the researcher would flesh this out more and note that there are distinct differences between the critical worldviews of different groups of activists; worldviews could be deemed to range from radical to reformist. Selective coding ascertains the central concepts identified through open and axial coding and determines their interrelationship: Do emergent categories and the range of their different dimensions impact other categories? Grounded theory enables researchers to move beyond description and actually develop an understanding about how categories of meaning actually function within organizations, communities, or cultures.

#### SUMMARY

The qualitative research methods, as well as the practical steps for data management and modes of data analysis, detailed in this chapter can be used by all researchers across the various methodological positions described in chapter 2; these methods are central to any endeavor focused on social construction and negotiation of meaning and solid supplements to positivist and post-positivist research. The chapter is far from comprehensive, however, as I have skipped methods and modes of analysis such as autoethnography and computer-based data analysis for space considerations. The methods discussed here—including interviews, ethnography, and qualitative content analysis—

have been the methods most frequently used to explore social activism. For this reason, these methods will be explained and demonstrated within the context of different research sites in the following chapters. Each of the following chapters will commence with conceptualizations of each research site and then delve into the dominant qualitative methods used to explore those sites in past research.