



Second Edition

# **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

## **Analyzing Life**

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JOHNNY SALDAÑA  
MATT OMASTA



FIGURE 12.1 ● An effective cover slide for a presentation.

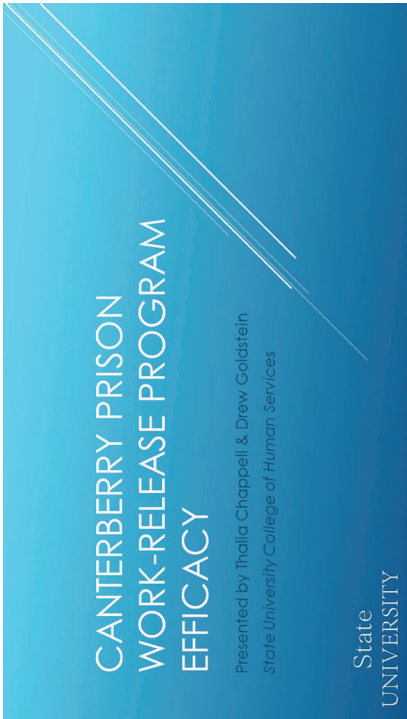


FIGURE 12.2 ● An alternative cover slide for a presentation.

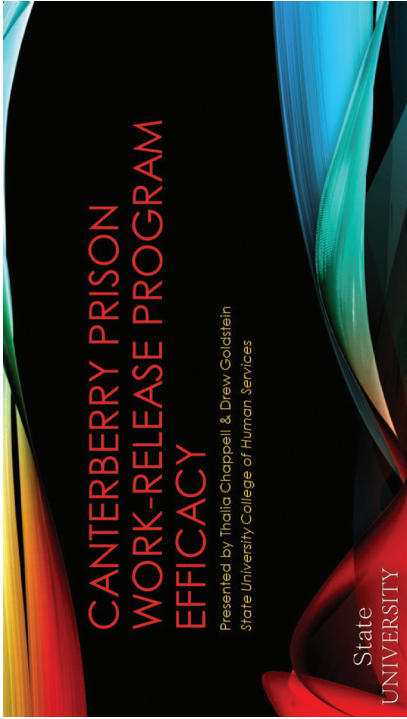


FIGURE 12.3 ● A pie chart with carefully considered color choices.

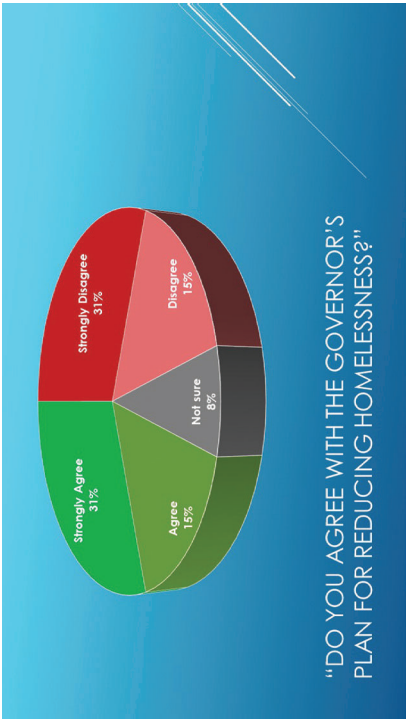
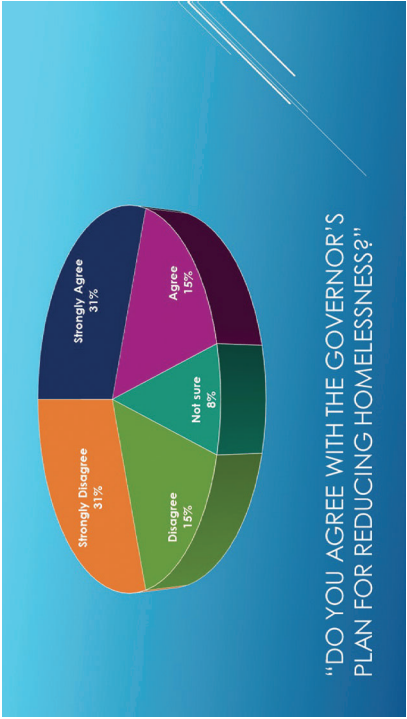


FIGURE 12.4 ● A pie chart with randomly considered color choices.



# **Qualitative Research**

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# Qualitative Research

## Analyzing Life

Second Edition

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Singapore | Washington DC | Melbourne



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# • Brief Contents •

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<b>List of Displays</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>xxii</b>
<b>Part I • Analyzing Qualitative Data</b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1 • Introduction: Analyzing Life	2
Chapter 2 • Analyzing Field Sites	26
Chapter 3 • Analyzing Documents, Artifacts, Visual Images, and Digital Materials	54
Chapter 4 • Analyzing Interviews: Preparing, Conducting, and Transcribing	80
Chapter 5 • Analyzing Interviews: Condensing and Coding	104
<b>Part II • Analyzing the Framework</b>	<b>125</b>
Chapter 6 • Analyzing Qualitative Methodologies	126
Chapter 7 • Analyzing Qualitative Research Design	148
Chapter 8 • Analyzing Research Ethics	170
<b>Part III • Analytic Assemblage</b>	<b>189</b>
Chapter 9 • Analysis to Synthesis: Condensing, Patterning, and Unifying	190
Chapter 10 • Analysis to Synthesis: Understanding, Interpreting, and Theorizing	220

Chapter 11 • Analytic Write-Ups	254
Chapter 12 • Analytic Presentations and Professional Development	284
<b>Glossary</b>	<b>304</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>322</b>



# • Detailed Contents •

---

<b>List of Displays</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>xvii</b>
The Organization and Through-Line of the Book	xvii
The Coauthors' Approach	xviii
To the Instructor	xix
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>About the Authors</b>	<b>xxii</b>
<b>Part I • Analyzing Qualitative Data</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1 • Introduction: Analyzing Life</b>	<b>2</b>
Learning Objectives	2
Introduction	2
Developing Fundamental Qualitative Analytic Skills	3
<b>Condensing large amounts of data</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Unifying seemingly different things</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life</b>	<b>13</b>
On Qualitative Data Analysis—and Life	20
Closure and Transition	21
Resources for an Introduction to Qualitative Analysis	22
Analytic Exercises	22
Sample Data for Analysis	22
<b>Chapter 2 • Analyzing Field Sites</b>	<b>26</b>
Learning Objectives	26
Introduction	26
On Culture	27
Observation Settings	28
<b>Finding a place and space</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Access</b>	<b>29</b>

The Observer's Frames	30
<b>Lenses, filters, and angles for fieldwork</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Observer membership roles</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Purpose-driven observations</b>	<b>33</b>
Field Notes	33
<b>Written documentation of analytic observations</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Front matter</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>The setting</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Jottings and write-ups</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>Observer's comments</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Time stamps</b>	<b>39</b>
Technical Matters of Fieldwork and Field Notes	40
<b>Audio- and video-recording</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Fieldwork clock hours</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Field note files</b>	<b>43</b>
Analyzing Observations of Social Life	43
<b>Reflecting on action, reaction, and interaction</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>Reflecting on routines, rituals, and rules</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Reflecting on roles and relationships</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Analytic memoing of field notes</b>	<b>46</b>
Closure and Transition	50
Resources for Participant Observation	50
Analytic Exercises for Participant Observation	50
Sample Field Notes for Analysis	50

## **Chapter 3 • Analyzing Documents, Artifacts, Visual Images, and Digital Materials** **54**

Learning Objectives	54
Introduction	54
On Values, Attitudes, and Beliefs	55
Analyzing Manifest and Latent Contents	57
The Materials and Meanings of Human Production	58
Analyzing Documents	59
<b>Collecting materials</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Analyzing attention</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Analyzing identity</b>	<b>62</b>
Analyzing Artifacts	64
<b>Analyzing belonging</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Analyzing symbolism</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Analyzing process</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Analyzing extensions</b>	<b>69</b>
Analyzing Visual Images	70
<b>Analyzing collaboratively</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Analyzing evocation</b>	<b>71</b>

Analyzing Digital Materials	73
<b>Analyzing sentiment</b>	<b>74</b>
The Routines, Rituals, Rules, Roles, and Relationships in Documents, Artifacts, Visual Images, and Digital Materials	76
Closure and Transition	77
Resources for Analyzing Documents, Artifacts, Visual Images, and Digital Materials	78
Analytic Exercises for Documents, Artifacts, Visual Images, and Digital Materials	78
Sample Photograph	79
<b>Chapter 4 • Analyzing Interviews: Preparing, Conducting, and Transcribing</b>	<b>80</b>
Learning Objectives	80
Introduction	80
Types of Interviews	81
<b>Surveys and structured interviews</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Unstructured interviews</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>Focus groups</b>	<b>84</b>
Participant Selection	85
<b>Sampling methods</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Number of interviews</b>	<b>87</b>
Interview Preparation, Scheduling, and Arrangements	89
<b>Audio- and video-recording equipment</b>	<b>91</b>
Asking Questions	92
<b>Interview protocols</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Phrasing the inquiry</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Maintaining the conversation</b>	<b>98</b>
Transcribing	100
<b>Basic documentation principles</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Topic summaries</b>	<b>102</b>
Closure and Transition	102
Resources for Interviewing	102
Analytic Exercises for Interviewing	103
<b>Chapter 5 • Analyzing Interviews: Condensing and Coding</b>	<b>104</b>
Learning Objectives	104
Introduction	104
Interview Condensation	105
Analyzing Interviews Through Codes and Coding	108
<b>In Vivo Coding and analytic formatting</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Process Coding</b>	<b>112</b>

<b>Values Coding</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>Emotion Coding</b>	<b>115</b>
Closure and Transition	117
Analytic Exercises for Interviewing	117
Sample Interview Transcript	118

## **Part II • Analyzing the Framework 125**

### **Chapter 6 • Analyzing Qualitative Methodologies 126**

Learning Objectives	126
Introduction	126
Theoretical Premises of Qualitative Research	126
<b>Ontology and epistemology</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>The constructivist nature of qualitative inquiry</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>Paradigms</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>An example of quantitative research</b>	<b>128</b>
<b>An example of qualitative research</b>	<b>129</b>
A Rationale for Qualitative Research	130
Selected Methodologies of Qualitative Research and Analysis	131
<b>Ethnography</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Case study</b>	<b>133</b>
<b>Grounded theory</b>	<b>134</b>
<b>Phenomenology</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Content analysis</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Discourse analysis</b>	<b>138</b>
<b>Action research</b>	<b>139</b>
<b>Evaluation research</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Autoethnography</b>	<b>142</b>
Mixed Methods	143
On Genres	146
Closure and Transition	146
Resources for Analyzing Qualitative Research Methodologies	147
Analytic Exercises for Qualitative Research Methodologies	147
Supplemental Readings	147

### **Chapter 7 • Analyzing Qualitative Research Design 148**

Learning Objectives	148
Introduction	148
Researching and Analyzing the Topic	149
<b>Focusing the study's topic</b>	<b>150</b>
<b>Writing the purpose statement</b>	<b>151</b>
<b>Writing the rationale</b>	<b>152</b>

Analyzing the Literature	153
<b>Initial searches</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Organizing and managing the literature</b>	<b>154</b>
<b>Consulting mentors, experts, and peers</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>Unifying the literature</b>	<b>155</b>
Research Questions	156
<b>Developing research questions</b>	<b>156</b>
Site Selection	159
Participant Selection	159
<b>Sampling</b>	<b>160</b>
Data Collection Methods	161
Data Analysis Methods	162
Presentation Modes	162
Timeline Design	163
Conceptual Frameworks	164
<b>Examples of conceptual frameworks</b>	<b>164</b>
Closure and Transition	167
Resources for Analyzing Qualitative Research Design	167
Analytic Exercises for Qualitative Research Design	168
Outline for a Qualitative Research Proposal	168
 <b>Chapter 8 • Analyzing Research Ethics</b>	 <b>170</b>
Learning Objectives	170
Introduction	170
The Rules of Research	171
<b>Consent</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>Comprehensive information</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Communication</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>Conflict-free research</b>	<b>174</b>
Institutional Review Boards	175
<b>What is human subjects research?</b>	<b>175</b>
<b>Review types and timelines</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>IRB applications</b>	<b>177</b>
Researcher and Participant Relationships	182
Ethics in Social Media Research	182
Analyzing Ethical Ambiguity	184
Closure and Transition	185
Resources for Research Ethics	186
Analytic Exercises for Research Ethics	186

## **Part III • Analytic Assemblage** **189**

### **Chapter 9 • Analysis to Synthesis: Condensing, Patterning, and Unifying** **190**

Learning Objectives	190
Introduction	190
On Synthesis	191
Condensing Large Amounts of Data	192
<b>Analyzing relevant text</b>	<b>192</b>
<b>Codes and coding</b>	<b>193</b>
<b>Descriptive Coding and subcoding</b>	<b>194</b>
<b>Dramaturgical Coding</b>	<b>196</b>
<b>Versus Coding</b>	<b>198</b>
<b>Found poetry</b>	<b>200</b>
Patterning Textual, Visual, and Digital Materials	201
<b>Categories</b>	<b>201</b>
<b>Themes</b>	<b>205</b>
Unifying Seemingly Different Things	210
<b>Concepts</b>	<b>210</b>
<b>Propositions</b>	<b>212</b>
<b>Matrices and tabular displays</b>	<b>214</b>
<b>Mixed methods</b>	<b>217</b>
Closure and Transition	218
Analytic Exercises for Analysis to Synthesis	219

### **Chapter 10 • Analysis to Synthesis: Understanding, Interpreting, and Theorizing** **220**

Learning Objectives	220
Introduction	220
Understanding Social Processes of Human Action, Reaction, and Interaction	221
<b>Assertions</b>	<b>221</b>
<b>Vignettes</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>Diagrammatic displays</b>	<b>227</b>
Interpreting the Routines, Rituals, Rules, Roles, and Relationships of Social Life	229
<b>Analytic meta-memos</b>	<b>229</b>
Theorizing	231
<b>Five properties of a theory</b>	<b>231</b>
<b>Constructing theory: Life learnings</b>	<b>234</b>
<b>Constructing theory: An analytic review</b>	<b>235</b>
CAQDAS	240
On Credibility and Trustworthiness	243

Closure and Transition	245
Resources for Analysis to Synthesis	249
<b>Qualitative data analysis</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Technology for qualitative data analysis</b>	<b>249</b>
Analytic Exercises for Analysis to Synthesis	249
Sample Data for Analysis to Synthesis	250
<b>Chapter 11 • Analytic Write-Ups</b>	<b>254</b>
Learning Objectives	254
Introduction	254
Stylistic Approaches to Research Writing	255
<b>Descriptive and realistic</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>Analytic and formal</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>Confessional</b>	<b>258</b>
<b>Impressionist</b>	<b>259</b>
<b>Interpretive</b>	<b>260</b>
<b>Reflexive</b>	<b>262</b>
<b>Critical and advocacy</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>Literary narrative</b>	<b>264</b>
<b>Collaborative and polyvocal</b>	<b>265</b>
<b>Dramatic</b>	<b>267</b>
<b>Poetic</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>Other writing and presentation styles</b>	<b>271</b>
On Writing About the Major Elements of a Study	272
<b>Writing is prewriting</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>The research design as a preliminary report outline</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Something to say</b>	<b>274</b>
<b>The evidentiary warrant</b>	<b>276</b>
<b>Point of view</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>Write easy, not hard</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>On citations and references</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>On titles, abstracts, and searches</b>	<b>278</b>
Journal Article Submission and Publication	280
Closure and Transition	281
Resources for Analytic Write-Ups	281
Analytic Exercises for Write-Ups	282
Sample Abstracts for Analysis	282
<b>Chapter 12 • Analytic Presentations and Professional Development</b>	<b>284</b>
Learning Objectives	284
Introduction	284
Paper Presentations	286
<b>Roles of participants</b>	<b>286</b>
<b>Protocols and etiquette</b>	<b>286</b>

<b>Slide design</b>	<b>288</b>
<b>Types of slides</b>	<b>289</b>
Poster Presentations	290
Dramatic/Staged Readings	292
Presenting Data Effectively	293
<b>Ground plans</b>	<b>294</b>
<b>Word clouds</b>	<b>295</b>
<b>Photos and videos</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>Diagrams/models</b>	<b>296</b>
Professional Networking	297
Professional Development	298
<b>Learning More About Qualitative Research</b>	<b>298</b>
Analysis as a Lens, Filter, and Angle on Life	300
Closure	301
Resources for Presenting Qualitative Research and Professional Development as a Qualitative Researcher	302
Analytic Exercises for Presentations and Professional Development	303
 <b>Glossary</b>	 <b>304</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>Index</b>	<b>322</b>



# • List of Displays •

---

<b>Figure 1.1</b> • This abstract artwork possesses unity (original in color).	9
<b>Figure 1.2</b> • This couple is engaged in action, reaction, and interaction.	11
<b>Figure 1.3</b> • Mardi Gras initiates rituals with decor that symbolize the event's meaning.	14
<b>Figure 1.4</b> • Humans interact through their roles and relationships.	18
<b>Figure 1.5</b> • The individual in social interaction experiences a tightly interwoven nucleus of action, reaction, and interaction patterns within the interrelated five Rs.	19
<b>Figure 2.1</b> • A fieldworker's positionality has a lens, filter, and angle, comparable to a camera.	31
<b>Figure 2.2</b> • A pencil sketch ground plan of an elementary school's visual art classroom.	36
<b>Figure 2.3</b> • A screenshot from Transana video analysis software.	40
<b>Figure 2.4</b> • Excerpts from a fieldwork observation log.	42
<b>Figure 3.1</b> • Infer or interpret what may be going through the wife's and husband's minds.	57
<b>Figure 3.2</b> • This glass paperweight has a symbolic representation for its owner.	67
<b>Figure 3.3</b> • A representational image from a weight-loss workbook.	72
<b>Figure 3.4</b> • A representational image from a weight-loss workbook.	72
<b>Figure 3.5</b> • Masks were made by military service members during art therapy treatment at the National Intrepid Center of Excellence, Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, Bethesda, MD, US.	77
<b>Figure 3.6</b> • A photograph for visual analysis.	79
<b>Figure 4.1</b> • A researcher's interview protocol for people with diabetes.	93
<b>Figure 5.1</b> • Values, attitudes, and beliefs are a tightly interrelated system.	114
<b>Figure 5.2</b> • An emotional arc, derived from a participant's interview transcript.	117
<b>Figure 6.1</b> • Impact of correctional environment upon individual women.	137
<b>Figure 6.2</b> • An Excel spreadsheet displays both quantitative and qualitative survey data.	145

<b>Figure 7.1</b>	• The central research question serves as a focal point that holds the related research questions.	157
<b>Figure 7.2</b>	• A visual model for a conceptual framework.	166
<b>Figure 8.1</b>	• A template for an informed consent letter.	179
<b>Figure 9.1</b>	• The concept of emotional labor and five of its observable constituent elements.	212
<b>Figure 9.2</b>	• The relationship between antecedent conditions, mediating variables, and outcomes.	213
<b>Figure 9.3</b>	• A matrix of “lifelong impact” across high school (HS) graduates from the 1950s to 2000s.	214
<b>Figure 10.1</b>	• The key assertion derives from assertions and subassertions.	222
<b>Figure 10.2</b>	• A model in progress of HIV test anxiety.	227
<b>Figure 10.3</b>	• Eight categories of “home” and two participants’ contrasting responses.	237
<b>Figure 10.4</b>	• Four variables of “home” and their components.	239
<b>Figure 10.5</b>	• A screenshot from Quirkos software.	242
<b>Figure 10.6</b>	• A screenshot from Dedoose software.	242
<b>Figure 10.7</b>	• A summary of analytic methods profiled in Chapters 9 and 10.	245
<b>Figure 12.1</b>	• An effective cover slide for a presentation.	inside front cover
<b>Figure 12.2</b>	• An alternative cover slide for a presentation.	inside front cover
<b>Figure 12.3</b>	• A pie chart with carefully considered color choices.	inside front cover
<b>Figure 12.4</b>	• A pie chart with randomly selected color choices.	inside front cover
<b>Figure 12.5</b>	• A PowerPoint text comparison slide.	290
<b>Figure 12.6</b>	• A scene from a research-based reader’s theatre script.	292
<b>Figure 12.7</b>	• A Room Arranger 2D “bird’s-eye” ground plan view of a classroom.	294
<b>Figure 12.8</b>	• A Room Arranger 3D ground plan view of a classroom.	295
<b>Figure 12.9</b>	• A word cloud of term frequencies.	295
<b>Figure 12.10</b>	• A diagram of interacting factors, drawn with NVivo software.	297

# • Preface •

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*Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* introduces undergraduate- and graduate-level readers to methods of conducting field-based inquiry in natural social settings.

## The Organization and Through-Line of the Book

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The coauthors take a unique approach to the organization of this textbook. Unlike the majority of methods works, we promote that it's important to learn the craft of qualitative research before students learn the art of it. Thus, Part I of this book acquaints readers with ways of collecting qualitative data through methods such as participant observation; documents, artifacts, visual images, and digital materials; and interviews. Part II discusses the elements of research design, while Part III focuses on the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of research.

This book also differs from other introductory textbooks about qualitative inquiry by emphasizing analysis throughout the research endeavor rather than toward the latter stages of it. Most research methods texts place data analysis chapters in the latter third or fourth of the book. We begin with qualitative data analysis in Chapter 1, and that thematic thread is woven throughout each chapter that follows. The reason for this approach is that analysis is one of the most elusive processes to students of qualitative inquiry. Unlike quantitative approaches, there are no standardized formulas or algorithms to generate answers. Qualitative inquiry relies on multiple heuristics (open-ended methods of discovery) to construct researcher insights about social life. We therefore provide several conventional and creative ways to analyze empirical materials collected during all stages of the study.

This first chapter of Part I begins with an overview and discussion of five basic analytic skills we believe all qualitative researchers should possess. Chapter 2 describes methods of observing participants in natural social settings. Chapter 3 outlines analytic methods for documents, artifacts, visual images, and digital materials. Chapters 4 and 5 address the most frequent method for collecting qualitative data: interviews. For the second edition of this text, Chapter 3 contains additional discussion on sentiment analysis of social media data.

Part II then segues into research design. Chapter 6 provides an overview of major qualitative research methodologies. Chapter 7 outlines design factors to consider before fieldwork begins. Chapter 8 discusses the ethics involved in research with human participants. For the second edition, several methodologies profiled in Chapter 6 draw from different research study examples. Chapter 8 addresses ethics in social media research.

Part III delves into research representation and presentation. Chapters 9 and 10 focus on analytic synthesis, while Chapter 11 provides an overview of the writing styles of qualitative research reportage. Chapter 12 offers guidelines for sharing research and resources for continued development as a qualitative researcher. For the second edition, Chapter 10's discussion of theory has been revised slightly, and several writing examples profiled in Chapter 11 also draw from different research study examples. A glossary of terms concludes the text.

For the second edition, the coauthors have deleted the first edition's Appendix of three representative qualitative research articles. The audiences for this book consist of a broad range of disciplines, so we leave it to instructors to recommend both classic and contemporary research studies in their fields as supplemental course readings. This book has a companion website hosted by SAGE Publications that includes student resources such as downloadable interview transcripts, supplemental readings, and glossary flashcards, plus course syllabi, a test bank, and PowerPoint slides for instructors at <https://edge.sagepub.com/saldanaomasta2e>.

## The Coauthors' Approach

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Saldaña and Omasta bring to this project their experiences as theatre artists and educators at all levels. Our training as actors, directors, playwrights, and educators has given us not only a performative lens but also a deep human awareness of life. Practitioners of theatre must have perceptive insight into people's character to represent them truthfully in written play scripts and live on stage. We are taught to delve deep into motivations, emotions, and interaction through improvisational studio methods and in detailed analyses of scripted works. We have been studying life in its broadest sense for decades, and that has given us an advantage when we transfer those skills to the demands of qualitative inquiry.

However, we take a dramaturgical approach to research only when appropriate, because a study's design must be constructed around the goals of the project and the questions of interest, among other factors such as available time and resources. We bring to this book an analytic lens on life because it's what we've been trained to do. We are no different from those who study psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, communication, and health care. Even areas such as technology, business, and government require that their practitioners know about the intricate dynamics of social interaction. We are all acting, reacting, and interacting with life through what we label the five Rs: our routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships.

At the time of this writing and book production (the latter half of 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the patterns of daily social life in new and unpredictable ways. Depending on how medicine and public health trajectories evolve, methods of qualitative research such as in-person participant observation may decrease, while online social media research may increase. Interviews might be conducted more often through electronic mediation rather than in-person exchanges. Even the research topics and questions for inquiry might become more change-centered as investigators examine the pandemic's effects on society, culture, and individual lives.

The coauthors take a cautiously optimistic view of the future. We believe that change for the better is on the horizon, but the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships we currently know and experience will transform as a result of COVID-19. This makes qualitative researchers necessary documentarians and analysts of social change. The ability to make sense, make meaning, and offer possible solutions to people's dilemmas are vital contributions to creating a better world.

The coauthors acknowledge that life is complex, yet answers to our most pressing problems can actually be quite simple; they're just very difficult to realize. Since all of us have individual value, attitude, and belief systems, each of us has our own agendas, our own causes to fight for, and our own axes to grind. Sometimes we are unified by an issue that brings us closer together as a community; other times we are highly divided over an issue because of our multiple and conflicting opinions. Life is complex, and people are complicated. *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* hopes to provide readers with ways to observe and make sense of the social world in all its rich and complicated complexity.

Johnny Saldaña  
Matt Omasta

## To the Instructor

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This approach to methods of qualitative research departs from the conventional order of topics and subtopics found in virtually all introductory textbooks in the subject. Thus, the curriculum sequence of *Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* diverges from the traditional ways instructors most likely learned the subject themselves and the way they currently teach it to their students.

This alternative sequencing has been field tested in graduate seminars at Arizona State University and in workshops for ResearchTalk and the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The curriculum provided students valuable working knowledge of data collection methods first, enabling them to later understand how these methods serve research design and the role they play in selected methodologies of qualitative inquiry (ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, etc.). Also, qualitative data analysis is too formidable a topic to reserve exclusively toward the latter portion of the curriculum when most students are fatigued and their “brains are full.” Thus, analysis in this textbook is introduced from the very beginning in order to build students’ analytic skills cumulatively as chapters and learning experiences progress throughout the course term.

We acknowledge that this model of teaching qualitative research methods can provoke some cognitive dissonance in instructors used to presenting the multiple topics of qualitative inquiry in a particular order. Change is hard, particularly for teachers accustomed to their established and signature ways of working. But we encourage colleagues to explore this new approach to the subject with students. In fact, consider how you yourself might implement an action research project, evaluation research

study, case study, or autoethnography about your personal experiences with different teaching methods and an alternative curricular paradigm of qualitative research methods instruction. Nonetheless, we offer that for those who need a more traditional curricular sequencing of topics for their course, begin with Part II's chapters, then proceed to Part I, and conclude with Part III.

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**Johnny Saldaña** received his BFA and MFA degrees in drama education from the University of Texas at Austin, and is Professor Emeritus from Arizona State University's (ASU) School of Film, Dance, and Theatre in the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. He is the author of *Longitudinal Qualitative Research: Analyzing Change Through Time* (AltaMira Press), *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed., SAGE Publications), *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* (Oxford University Press), *Ethnotheatre: Research From Page to Stage* (Left Coast Press), *Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind* (SAGE Publications), *Writing Qualitatively: The Selected Works of Johnny Saldaña* (Routledge), coauthor with the late Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman of *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook* (4th ed., SAGE Publications), and the editor of *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre* (AltaMira Press). His methods works have been cited and referenced in more than 18,000 research studies conducted in more than 130 countries.

Saldaña's research in qualitative inquiry, data analysis, and performance ethnography has received awards from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, the National Communication Association's Ethnography Division, the American Educational Research Association's Special Interest Group on Qualitative Research, New York University's Program in Educational Theatre, The Children's Theatre Foundation of America, and the ASU Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts. He has published a wide range of research articles in journals such as *Research in Drama Education*, *Multicultural Perspectives*, *Youth Theatre Journal*, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *Teaching Theatre*, *Research Studies in Music Education*, *International Review of Qualitative Research*, and *Qualitative Inquiry*, and has contributed several chapters to research methods handbooks.

**Matt Omasta** is Professor of Theatre Arts and Associate Dean of the Caine College of the Arts (CCA) at Utah State University. He received his BA from Ithaca College, his MA from Emerson College, and his PhD from Arizona State University. He is the author of *Play, Performance, and Identity: How Institutions Structure Ludic Spaces* (Routledge), *Playwriting and Young Audiences* (Intellect), and numerous articles in journals including *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, *Youth Theatre Journal*, *Theatre for Young Audiences Today*, *Theatre Topics*, and the *International Journal of Education and the Arts*, among others.

Omasta's work has been recognized by honors including the Founders' Award from the Educational Theatre Association, the Lin Wright Special Recognition Award and the Johnny Saldaña Outstanding Professor of Theatre Education Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education, and the Teacher of the Year and Undergraduate Mentor of the Year awards from USU/CCA.



# Analyzing Qualitative Data

PART I



# Introduction

## Analyzing Life

### Learning Objectives

After reading and reviewing this chapter, researchers should be able to

1. Define analysis and qualitative research,
2. List and describe five basic qualitative data analysis skills, and
3. Discuss how analysis is a continuous process throughout a qualitative research study.

### Introduction

**Analysis** (all bolded terms appear in the glossary) is the through-line for this introduction to qualitative research because we believe it is one of the least emphasized and thus most misunderstood facets of social inquiry. Willis (2015) defines analysis as “the series of steps that occur between data collection and the communication of results” (p. 56), but we rather assert that analysis begins at the very moment a researcher first conceives an idea for a study. Instead of some obligatory front matter that discusses why research is important or that surveys the history of the field, we focus on developing analytic skill sets as the first activity in the first section of this first chapter. It is important to develop these foundational skills early because the better researchers are at them from the very beginning, the better prepared they’ll be for managing and reflecting on **data** collected throughout the study. Most qualitative data are

documentation of what people say, do, write, and create. We discuss how analysis integrates with other essential research-related matters as chapters progress.

## Developing Fundamental Qualitative Analytic Skills

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Five of the most fundamental and critical analytic skills qualitative researchers and data analysts employ are

1. Condensing large amounts of data;
2. Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials;
3. Unifying seemingly different things;
4. Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction; and
5. Interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life.

Qualitative analysis is an active process with one's mind and body to find patterns in data and to articulate their interrelationships. It draws on researchers' abilities to synthesize the various facets of what they have observed and to reconfigure them into new formulations of meaning.

We offer some brief explanations and a few simulation exercises to acquaint beginning researchers with these necessary skills. First, purely for introductory purposes, we define **qualitative research** as an umbrella term for

a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The information or data collected and analyzed is primarily (but not exclusively) non-quantitative in character, consisting of textual materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and/or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings, and Internet sites, that document human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states. (Saldaña, 2011b, pp. 3–4)

If human experiences are the primary focus for investigation, then the researchers' primary focus should be the analysis of human actions and their meanings.

### Condensing large amounts of data

Qualitative researchers work with large collections of purposely gathered narrative and visual data, sometimes called **empirical materials**. Condensing large amounts of data is a necessary analytic task because a writer cannot report to readers absolutely everything gathered during the investigation. Researchers present selected facets of the inquiry that relate directly to the research question of interest, that they determine to be the most important information for others to know, and that provide sufficient evidence for their analytic claims. Also, individual researchers or even

multiple-member research teams cannot possibly keep every single **datum** (the singular form of data) coherently organized and accessible in their heads. The human mind, even with the help of computers, can retain only so much information. Human brains are hardwired to summarize and symbolize vast amounts of information in order to work more efficiently. “This ability to digest large amounts of information by breaking it into smaller pieces is how our brains turn information into knowledge” (Duhigg, 2016, pp. 245–246). Qualitative data analysis capitalizes on how humans naturally think.

We use the board game *Three for All!* (the commercial version of the psychological Remote Associates Test) as a playful analogy for what we do with qualitative data analysis and for developing analytic skills. A round of *Three for All!* presents three clues to a player, and not only must she guess the answers to the clues, she must also determine what the three answers share in common. For example, below is a clue for a word or phrase we’re prompting you to say out loud:

“You put two, sometimes four slices of bread in this thing and push the handle down to make the bread hot and crispy.”

Hopefully you said “toaster.” What you just did was condense a long description into a shorter form. You took a 23-word datum and assigned it a one-word symbolic representation, or a descriptive **code**. Here’s another clue; determine what we’re describing:

“You put liquids and stuff in this thing and then push a button and it swirls fast and mixes everything up.”

You might have thought of a “food processor.” And while that response would be correct, given the information or data we gave you, it’s not the most appropriate answer or code because it’s not what we originally had in mind. So, we’ll have to provide additional information and more reflection time to steer you toward a more appropriate response:

“You make drinks like margaritas and milk shakes and smoothies in this thing.”

Perhaps your next answer is “blender.” That would be the better response or code. The lessons: sometimes both responses or perspectives can be valid, sometimes you need to consider multiple options before selecting the most appropriate one, and sometimes certain condensed forms of meaning are better or more precise than others.

Here’s a third clue/datum:

“You put ground coffee and water in this thing and it heats up and it makes a hot beverage.”

But we have made an error. We were not supposed to say the words “coffee” or “makes” in our clue because, according to *Three for All!* rules, we’re not allowed to say the actual answer in our description. But it’s too late to take it back. You’ve been given an advantage with our description and you give us the correct answer: “coffeemaker.” But this is a teachable moment. There will be times when the symbol or code you create for a datum can employ a word or two from the datum itself. This is a method called **In Vivo Coding** (discussed further in Chapter 5). Sometimes, the people we interview provide rich insights with their own words, better than we could ever compose.

A round of *Three for All!* provides you with three different clues, and you must generate a separate answer for each prompt. Condense these sets of data into shorter codes:

1. “This has got Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Genesis, and Revelation in it.”
2. “This has a lot of words in alphabetical order along with their definitions in it.”
3. “This has a lot of names of people who live in a city, their home addresses, phone numbers, area codes, and it’s got yellow pages in it.”

Do you want the correct answers now to make sure you got them right? We could provide them, but that’s not always how qualitative data analysis works. If an individual researcher is to condense large amounts of data into shorter forms, she must rely on her own best judgment to determine if she has gotten it right. Two or more researchers might work collaboratively on coding the data to better ensure consistency of interpretations—a form of **intercoder agreement**. Sometimes researchers can go back to the people who originally supplied the data to ask for their feedback and verification but, more often than not, researchers take responsibility for their analytic coding assignments. If they feel confident with their choices, that’s a good intuitive sign. Nothing is set in stone—researchers can always revise a code later if new information suggests a reanalysis of their initial assignments is in order.

Analyzing life, in part, sometimes consists of symbolizing or condensing what people say about their perceptions and experiences into essences. Review the following interview quotations from participants and, just as with the *Three for All!* example above, determine what word or words you would use to capture the meaning of each. Try to go beyond the topic, usually phrased as a noun, and label the content as an action-oriented **Process Code** or gerund (a gerund is an “-ing” word/phrase such as reflecting, praising accomplishments, complaining about pain).

1. “You can’t trust politicians. Once they get elected, they go back on their campaign promises and do the opposite of what they said they’d do. And it’s just to get votes; they don’t really care about people.”
2. “Being a parent is hard. You’re worried about your children; even when they’re fully grown and on their own, you still want to know if they’re doing

OK. You can e-mail and Facebook all you want, but you still need to see it in their faces, you know?”

3. “I’m paying about \$500 a year in co-pays for prescription medications. I looked at the total and thought, ‘When did that happen? When did I start needing so much medicine to live my life?’”

You might have found it quite difficult to find just the right Process Codes to symbolize the essences of these quotations. Unlike quantitative research with its standardized formulas to generate statistical answers, qualitative inquiry relies on researchers’ creative thinking and **heuristics**—methods of discovery—to generate comparable findings. Solid quantitative reasoning relies on numeric accuracy. In qualitative research, precision rests with researchers’ word choices.

In sum, an essential qualitative data analytic skill is the ability to condense large amounts of data into briefer summarized forms. Condensed data do not always have to take the form of codes; other summative forms such as categories and sentence-length themes are possible. Also, summation can range from condensing a 30-page interview transcript into 10 pages of the most important or relevant passages, to analyzing only a 5-minute segment of a 30-minute video because the excerpt seems to capture the richest portion of the total social interaction. We discuss more on these analytic principles later. For now, we examine a second critical skill.

## Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials

**Patterns** are human constructions and concepts: we notice repetition in human actions and thus label them as routines, rituals, or rules. Roles and relationships (e.g., parent–child, customer–salesperson, citizen–government) also maintain repetitive actions according to function and purpose. This repetition or pattern-making, assuming it consists of constructive purposes, helps humans feel secure and provides a sense of social order and continuity to daily life. People do most things over and over out of need, habit, adherence to tradition, responsibility, socialization, or because the routine has proved to generate successful results. Sometimes, though, patterns can consist of bad habits or destructive actions such as addiction to prescription drugs or constant belittling of a spouse. But noticing these is important, too. When individuals are aware of what’s working and what is not, they can hopefully take positive action to rectify the wrongs and make a better self and world. Noticing patterns gets researchers closer to finding answers about the human condition—that is, why people do the things they do.

Let’s return to the *Three for All!* game to review pattern construction. In the most recent round, we prompted you to respond to this clue: “This has got Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Genesis, and Revelation in it.” Hopefully the clue and your background knowledge were sufficient enough to generate the answer, “the Bible.” One answer or datum is a good thing, but reliable or credible conclusions cannot be drawn from just one facet of knowledge. Thus, we need more observations and answers to construct a pattern in progress.

The second clue prompts, “This has a lot of words in alphabetical order along with their definitions in it.” Again, hopefully the clue and your background knowledge were sufficient to generate the answer, “a dictionary.” A pattern, as we define it, starts to form when something repeats more than twice in the data. Thus, your goal in the game is to start formulating what the Bible and a dictionary might have in common—the characteristics or qualities they share. Your mind is imaging them and reflecting on their constituent elements or **properties**: they both have bound pages with words on them, for example. You also might brainstorm answers such as, “They’re online books” or “They’re reference books.” But as you reflect on how or what they might have in common, you conclude that the Bible is not considered a reference book, so you eliminate that answer as a possibility—for now. And, yes, they are both accessible online through several platforms, but they are also published in hardback and paperback formats. More information is needed since the more repetitions, the more stable the pattern.

You now reflect on the third clue or datum: “This has a lot of names of people who live in a city, their home addresses, numbers, area codes, and it’s got yellow pages in it.” You have the answer but soon realize it might go by different names, from the colloquial “phone book” to the more formal “telephone directory” or even the overtly stated “yellow pages.” You keep all of these in mind for now. A specific name might or might not matter at this point, but at least you feel confident that you have the gist.

You now have comparable forms of data that occur more than twice, so you reflect on your three different answers: the Bible, a dictionary, and a telephone directory. The next goal of *Three for All!* is to propose what these three things have in common. In other words, what is the pattern that seems to emerge? Remember that several answers can all be correct in one way or another, but some answers and often just one of them, in your best judgment, might be more appropriate or credible than others. You could offer that what the Bible, a dictionary, and a telephone directory all have in common is that they all have pages, or that they’re all accessible online, or that they’re all things you can read, or that they all contain numbers, and so on. But the most seemingly appropriate answer you decide to put forth is, “They’re all books.”

If you came to that conclusion or deduction fairly quickly, that’s good. But what might have seemed like an obvious answer actually took a lot of cognitive processing to formulate. Your mind went through some sophisticated mental operations to arrive at the answer, and it’s important to know what some of these processes are because they’ll play a role as you continue qualitative analytic work. Briefly, four of these operations are as follows.

**Induction** is open-ended exploration of a problem, going into an inquiry to learn as you go, formulating answers as more information is compiled. Every sentence-length clue you received in the *Three for All!* simulations above prompted you to think inductively. Much of qualitative research is inductive inquiry or **analytic induction**, because researchers generally begin with open-ended questions for investigation rather than fixed hypotheses to test. Think of induction as on-the-job training in which one learns more and gets better at the tasks each day.

**Substruction** examines separate pieces and parts of the whole for more detailed analysis. Each one of the three answers you provided for a round of *Three for All!* (e.g., Bible, dictionary, telephone directory) needs to be considered on its own before you determine what the three share—that is, their pattern.

**Abduction** examines an array of possibilities in order to select the most likely, plausible, or best possibility. Any time you had more than one alternative, option, or answer to consider while playing *Three for All!* (e.g., a food processor or a blender; a phone book, telephone directory, or yellow pages) you exercised abductive thinking. Qualitative inquiry considers a range of participant perspectives and experiences, including the unexpected and anomalous. Researchers look at the totality of data to consider different possibilities for interpretation and, after careful analysis, put forth the one(s) that seem(s) most likely.

**Deduction** is a culminating process and product, derived from inductive, substructive, and/or abductive thinking. It is the conclusion drawn after considering all the evidence or data (e.g., “They’re all books”). Deductions come in various forms: some are summative statements like assertions, propositions, and theories. But deductions can also consist of smaller summaries (toaster, blender, coffeemaker) that accumulate into a more comprehensive deduction (they’re all small kitchen appliances).

After reading each *Three for All!* clue, you employed inductive thinking through your reflections on their contents. When you mentally brainstormed the possibilities of what they all shared in common, you utilized both substructive and abductive thinking. And when you formulated what the three things had in common, you thought deductively by constructing a pattern that unified them. Unifying or finding relationships among and between data is another essential analytic skill, discussed next.

## Unifying seemingly different things

When you play *Three for All!*, the goal is to unify three things according to what they have in common. If our three prompts to you are butter, ice, and candle, what property do they share? They all melt.

Another facet of qualitative data analysis is constructing relationships between different condensed forms of data and the patterns observed. This goes beyond finding what different things have in common: it’s also unifying them in some way through the analysis and description of their **interrelationship** or how they connect. **Unity** is a design principle in which seemingly disparate things or elements harmonize. Unity is an aesthetic that suggests, “These things belong together, go together, or work together.” Qualitative research reports should also attempt to present a feeling of unity or coherence in their presentation. An abstract portrait (see Figure 1.1) can at first appear as a random, chaotic arrangement. But the artwork possesses unity because the varying shapes are all nonrealistic, fluid, and graphically bold.

Sometimes what unifies elements of a research study is that they are all distinct yet interrelated facets of the same experience or **phenomenon**. Saldaña’s (1997) first ethnographic study documented a white, female, beginning school teacher’s experiences



at a predominantly Hispanic school. Three main challenges she faced as a novice educator were (1) unfamiliarity with the young people's Spanish language, (2) the ethos or culture of urban youth, and (3) the gangs that maintained an active presence in the neighborhood. Language, ethos, and gangs were three major elements that contributed to and unified the experience of *cultural shock* (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) of this novice teacher's indoctrination into the profession.

Sometimes unity is achieved by connecting elements of an **analytic story-line** together. Qualitative researchers place great stock in process, meaning the story-lines or trajectories of human action. This might include marking the phases, stages, and/or cycles of the patterns observed. As an example, Saldaña conducted fieldwork in elementary schools to observe young people's emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Children's understanding of and vocabulary for emotions progresses from a core understanding at approximately ages 6 and 7 of such basic feelings they identify as happy, sad, mad, sly, sneaky, excited, and so on. Though one might expect a cumulatively smooth trajectory of emotional development as children grow older, that is not the case.

Around age 9, most children go through *emotional ambivalence*, a developmental stage in which they experience new and complex emotions such as guilt, angst, and so on, yet they do not have the vocabulary to identify and thus describe their feelings. One child might say she experienced “a different kind of happy—a floating happy” to describe euphoria. By ages 11–12, their emotional vocabulary expands greatly to include such nuanced feelings they identify as caring, proud, confident, embarrassed, regretful, apprehensive, distraught, and envious. This developmental story of their *emotional literacy* compares various stages to illustrate change. Emotions unify this analytic story-line.

Another way to achieve unity in research is to find a central or **core category** that functions as an umbrella for all of the study's constituent elements. Kathy

**FIGURE 1.1** ● This abstract artwork possesses unity (original in color).



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Charmaz, a key writer of grounded theory (explained in Chapter 6), explored how serious chronic illness affects the body and the identity of self. A core category she identified from her interviews with the physically impaired was *adapting*. Her analysis below explains the story or trajectory of adapting (a core Process Code) to physical impairment through time:

By adapting, I mean altering life and self to accommodate to physical losses and to reunify the body and self accordingly. Adapting implies that the individual acknowledges impairment and alters life and self in socially and personally acceptable ways. Bodily limits and social circumstances often force adapting to loss. Adapting shades into acceptance. Thus, ill people adapt when they try to accommodate and flow with the experience of illness. . . . After long years of ignoring, minimizing, struggling against, and reconciling themselves to illness, they adapt as they regain a sense of wholeness, of unity of body and self in the face of loss. (Charmaz, 2009, pp. 155–156)

Social life can be messy and complex. Unfortunately, the short form of an academic research article might not always permit a detailed explanation of the complex messes people sometimes get into. That's why the skills of condensing, patterning, and unifying are necessary for research write-ups. Researchers don't have to present watered-down accounts of field experiences for research reportage, but they do need to put forth the major headlines or findings.

Researchers must also acknowledge that life's contradictions do not always enable a neatly unified analysis, and some issues are so complex that they require book-length narratives to describe the necessary, tightly interwoven details. Unity does not mean tying things up in a neat satin bow. A coarse hemp rope full of knots and frays looks unattractive but still possesses unity.

Qualitative analysis requires that researchers know how to analyze people and their lives. Social life, in its broadest sense, is composed of action, reaction, and interaction.

## Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction

**Action** is what a person does (e.g., thinking, speaking, and moving). **Reaction** is response to an action—to someone else's or one's own action or to given circumstances. **Interaction** is the collective back-and-forth sequences of action and reaction. These three terms and concepts constitute the cyclical process of humans engaged with social life. And a researcher's ability to perceptively observe and inquire about these processes provides her with rich data for intensive and, hopefully, insightful analysis. Clarke, Friese, and Washburn (2015) offer that people within social worlds are "groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals and building shared ideologies about how to go about

**FIGURE 1.2 • This couple is engaged in action, reaction, and interaction.**



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their business. They are interactive units, worlds of discourse, bounded not by geography or formal membership but by the limits of effective communication” (p. 140).

When an action occurs in everyday life, fieldworkers observe it and make note of its meaning—that is, its reason, motive, drive, purpose, objective, goal, intention, and so forth. Reactions suggest much about how people perceive and respond to others and the world around them and, like actions, offer a window into their values, attitudes, and beliefs. Even thoughts kept inside the mind (imagining, fantasizing, meditating) are considered actions and reactions because they are purposive. Look at Figure 1.2 and infer what’s happening between the two people. A popular folk saying goes, “Life is 20% what happens to you, and 80% how you react to it.” Lieberman (2013) scientifically supports this by asserting that our social brains are hardwired for reciprocity and influence by others.

Interactions, or collective exchanges of actions and reactions, compose units or **moments** for analysis. Researchers infer and interpret the sometimes hidden, subtextual agendas within and between humans as they act, react, and interact. They also infer and interpret broader social meanings about these moments of interaction patterns. It is a complex interplay of communication that observers attempt to understand through psychological, sociological, anthropological, and even dramaturgical (i.e., theatrical) lenses, filters, and angles—that is, the way each researcher perceives the social world.

Below is a narrative example of a moment of social interaction. It is set in a restaurant on an early Friday evening. Two male customers approximately in their

fifties are seated in a booth and a female server, approximately in her mid-twenties, is assigned to them:

- SERVER:** *(walking by the table carrying a tray of dishes)* Hi, I'll be with you two gentlemen in just a minute, OK?
- CUSTOMER 1:** OK. *(approximately 2 minutes pass)*
- SERVER:** *(returns to table, smiling)* OK, thanks for waiting. Can I get you two started on some drinks? *(she sets down two paper napkins on the table)*
- CUSTOMER 1:** Yes, and I think we're ready to order too, if we may.
- SERVER:** Certainly, let's do it! *(opens and writes on her order pad)* What can I get you?
- CUSTOMER 2:** Can I get the club sandwich, extra mayo on the side, and instead of fries, can I get coleslaw instead?
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad)* Certainly. And to drink?
- CUSTOMER 2:** What kind of flavored ice teas do you have?
- SERVER:** We have green, tropical, and raspberry.
- CUSTOMER 2:** I'll take tropical, no lemon.
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad)* No lemon, OK. *(to other customer, smiling)* And for you?
- CUSTOMER 1:** I'll have water, a Diet Coke, and the stuffed corn tortillas.
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad, cheerily)* OK, sounds good! Any appetizers to start with?
- CUSTOMERS 1 and 2:** No.
- SERVER:** *(smiling)* All right, I'll get this order sent to the kitchen for you right away. Thanks! *(she takes the menus from the table and leaves)*

To some, this might seem like a mundane, insignificant passage of dialogue exchanged between a restaurant server and customers. But to selected social researchers, the interaction is rich with meaning, as analyzed below. We offer that when we look at social action, reaction, and interaction (and notice the unity of those three terms), researchers can examine and analyze them through interrelated components we label the five Rs: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (notice the unity and pattern of alliteration in those five terms). Though all five work together in intricate interconnectivity, each one merits its own discussion.

## Interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life

The complexity of action, reaction, and interaction cannot always be neatly categorized into five separate facets for analysis, but they serve as an introductory foundation for focusing a researcher's lens, filter, and angle on social life.

***Routines.*** When researchers look at the properties of life qualitatively, they examine what patterns of action and reaction reoccur. **Routines** are actions that take care of the everyday business of living, symbolize our self-cultivated and socialized habits, and meet our human need to create a sense of order. Some believe that everyday, mundane, trivial routines are not worthy of investigation. But these particular patterns of social interaction can hold particular significance for a particular study. Humans do things over and over again for a reason, even if that reason could be perceived as irrational or self-destructive. And remember, too, that instability and inconsistency can be considered patterns of action.

The server in the dialogic restaurant moment above more than likely has an established introductory routine for her job: greet customers, take their drink orders, return with their drinks, take their food orders, submit their food orders for preparation, and so on. And even though the customers might be visiting this restaurant for the very first time, there is a generalized routine or **schema** established from their previous dining experiences at other establishments: wait to be seated, review the menu, place drink and food orders with the server, and so on. This socialized pattern organizes the business of a public routine.

But life does not always go smoothly, and humans must often deal with disruptions to patterned routines. Notice that within the expected interaction routine at the restaurant, selected moments were breached. The server expected to take just the drink orders first, but the customers wanted to take care of their food order at the same time. Other minor breaches occurred, such as side dish substitutions, which the server seemed cheerily willing to accommodate. Her gracious reactions to the disruptions of her routine suggest that she was willing to assume a compliant role during the interaction to create a pleasant dining experience for the customers. On the other hand, the accommodation to take both drink and food orders at the same time might have been secretly to her advantage because it would save time. Thus, her accommodation was not an acquiescence of power, but a mutual agreement to beneficially speed the routine. Another interpretation, however, might hold that the server did indeed lose power, masked by her cheery performativity or emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). In other words, she is paid to look happy and make customers feel satisfied.

Research gets enriched not only from examination of routines but also from the breaches, conflicts, and tensions that interrupt the flows of daily life. Researchers learn much from how people handle, avoid, and prevent the glitches that come their way. They also learn much from an awareness that people's routines can be repeated without question, prompting the researcher to reflect on the purpose or futility of

**FIGURE 1.3** ● **Mardi Gras initiates rituals with decor that symbolize the event's meaning.**



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these action patterns. As life is analyzed, qualitative researchers observe what people seem to be doing again and again and, perhaps more important, explore just why they are engaging in consistent action patterns.

**Rituals.** When researchers explore life qualitatively, they also look for the occasional nonroutine or nonmundane moments of action that seem to suggest meaningful importance, either to the participants or to the observer. This is a subjective interpretation: what is considered routine to one person could be deemed a **ritual** to another. Everyday life is occasionally punctuated with

the special, significant, or the sacred—that is, the patterned ceremonial event. These events or symbolic moments hold personal or cultural importance as they mark or affirm a tradition, an occasion, an achievement, a transition, a remembrance, or fulfillment. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) assert, “There can be no culture without ritual” (p. 234). Figure 1.3 illustrates how a holiday initiates rituals with decor that symbolize the event’s meaning.

People usually associate rituals with formal gatherings such as worship services, graduation ceremonies, weddings, and the like. But rituals can also exist in the daily or weekly routines of a brief prayer before a meal, a happy hour with friends every Friday afternoon, an exchange of gifts, or brisk morning runs through the neighborhood. A ritual transcends the routines of everyday matters because of the **significance** the pattern holds for the individual or group. Rituals are status-passages that demarcate transitions of some kind, usually through processes such as separation, reversal, continuity, cleansing, challenging, changing, renewing, or celebration. “These observances provide a form of performative punctuation in the passage of mundane time and the life-course” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 87).

Dining out might be considered not just another meal but also a ritual to some, because for most people it does not happen frequently and thus is considered a special event. But dining out might also be a routine for others because it might occur at predetermined, expected times—for example, every Friday night or every Sunday afternoon. Qualitative significance is subjectively attributed onto something by the participants and/or the researcher. If the overall action of dining out is a ritual, then the event is made up of smaller acts or micro-rituals—for example, the ritual of escorted seating to a table, the ritual of a friendly opening greeting by the server, the ritual of scanning the menu and selecting the “sacrifice,” and so on. And though tipping is usually not required, it is



a customary ritual in certain contexts, a token of thanks. Anthropologists have written much about the concept of ritual, ranging from cultures in developing countries to urban lifestyles, and from everyday matters to coming-of-age ceremonies. As it's used in this book, the word *ritual* means significant routine—that is, patterns of human action endowed with special meaning by their participants and/or from researchers' interpretations.

As life is observed, researchers discern whether a social pattern of action should be interpreted as a routine or a ritual. Rituals provide rich, self-contained nuggets for qualitative analysis. They lend insight into the value, attitude, and belief systems of the individual, group, or culture, and bring researchers closer to comprehending that which is symbolic, significant, and meaningful.

**Rules.** Most routines and rituals can be influenced to some extent by the **rules** set in place. When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine how tacit frames of acceptable social conduct or formal rules and laws are followed—or breached. Each society creates expectations, codes, and regulations for daily conduct, a process called **socialization**. This includes everything ranging from such benign behavior as waiting in line, to respecting the property of those who own it. Individuals also have their own rules for daily living, a personal code of ethics or a moral compass for action, reaction, and interaction with others. Those who do not conform to the socially established order of things might be perceived by the majority as deviant and stigmatized as outcasts. But rules are culturally and socially specific: what is unacceptable conduct in one setting or context might be completely appropriate in another setting or context.

Rules are based on traditions, morals, and value, attitude, and belief systems—they are part of a cultural grammar or schema (Bernard, 2018, p. 471). Their origins stem from sources as diverse as religious writings to current legislative needs as a society evolves (e.g., same-sex marriage, internet security, international terrorism). Even digital tools are laden with rules. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media require that users adhere to policies regarding appropriate language and images, along with structural rules such as length of postings or a user's minimum age. Rules, in their broadest sense, maintain social order and are usually designed to keep people and property safe from harm. Rules are an important part of the glue that holds a society together. But oppressive rules also exist, as does the abusive and discriminatory enforcement of such rules by those who abuse their authority. In addition, not everyone will agree with a particular law in place. As a colloquialism goes, "Not everything that is legal is ethical, and not everything that is ethical is legal."

In the restaurant scene above, there are few formal laws in place dictating the kind and quality of customer and server interactions. There are, however, social expectations that servers will show respect toward paying customers, and customers will respect the decorum of the establishment ("No shirt, no shoes, no service"). Even everyday conversation, including the question-answer adjacency pairs between the server and customers, follows tacit rules for dialogic turn-taking.

There are formal regulations and laws in place in many countries for restaurant employee health, sanitary conditions, proper food storage and preparation, and so on. Customers are also bound by acceptable forms of conduct in a public setting and an obligation to pay for food served to them and consumed. Although nothing is formally on the books (in the United States, at least) for gratuities that must be offered to servers, there are sociocultural traditions in place that encourage customers to tip servers according to the quality of service received (e.g., 15% for satisfactory service, 20% for very good service). The routine or ritualistic act of dining out is rife with rules.

Infractions of rules lead to a breakdown of the social order yet sometimes to positive outcomes. Traditions unquestioningly followed can lead to oppressive and even destructive consequences. Those who challenge the status quo often do so to create better life conditions or to initiate social justice. However, rules are about values systems, and conflicts can easily arise when one social segment's set of rules does not harmonize with the values system of another social segment. These rules refer to everything from a nation's constitution, to a teacher–student relationship, to unquestioned hegemony, to fascist police states, to Robert's Rules of Order.

Much of the academic literature refers to **power** as the grand construct that influences and affects social life. One of the concept's most insightful writers is philosopher Michel Foucault (1977), who proposed that power is sometimes an invisible network of social relationships in which the values system or ideology of one group is imposed on and accepted by another. Authoritative mandates restricting human actions can come from social institutions such as national and local government agencies, to people such as parents and older siblings. Power can also include a person's "cops in the head" (Boal, 1995), meaning indoctrinated messages learned throughout one's life about expected conduct and individual self-perception (e.g., "Real men don't cry," "I'm not attractive," "There's nothing I can do about it"). Some researchers maintain their lenses, filters, and angles on social life to investigate how those with and without power affect roles and relationships such as between people of different genders and/or races or between government and corporations. Rules, in their broadest sense, are just one facet of power, yet analyzing how they influence humans serves as a manageable way of understanding the complexity of power.

As researchers observe and analyze life, they document what rules guide the actions, reactions, and interactions of participants in their particular social settings. They determine what seems to be conditioned adherence to ways of working, formal organizational policies and procedures in place, and individual values systems influencing and affecting relationships. Gobo and Molle (2017) wisely remind us, though, that a society consists of more than rules, for the simplest of rules can generate complex human actions.

**Roles.** When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine human actions determined, to some extent, by the **roles** people play. Roles are the assumed or attributed actions, personas, and characteristics of individuals. Erving Goffman's (1959) groundbreaking sociological classic, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday*



*Life*, proposed that humans perform in accordance with how they wish to be perceived by others, and that personality consists of the various roles people portray throughout their lifetimes. But others might perceive people in different ways according to how they interpret such factors as physical appearance, speech, and social interactions.

At any given moment, each person plays one or more roles that possess various levels of **status** or position. In the military, privates respect and follow the orders of those with the rank of sergeant and lieutenant. Adult parents and teachers usually assume a higher status or power position over children and adolescents. Many men, knowingly or unknowingly, assume authority over women. Children (and adults) assume dominant roles over others when they act as bullies. Roles emerge from individuals' personalities or **identities**, a complex concept we discuss more fully in later chapters.

Roles are realized and enacted through particular routines, rituals, and rules of conduct. The restaurant scene above features two general, different roles: the customer and the server. Each role carries with it a socially constructed set of expectations—for example, expectations that the server will interact with customers in ways that will create a pleasant dining experience. Likewise, customers are expected in their roles to dine without disturbing other patrons with offensive actions such as loud profanity in a family restaurant. There are other general expectations such as common courtesy by customers toward the server—although some customers assume a more dominant role over someone whom they perceive in a subservient role. In this case, two white, senior, male customers interact pleasantly with a white, younger, female server. But if each of the three individuals' ages, genders, sexual orientations, races/ethnicities, nationalities, social classes, religious backgrounds, political affiliations, and family structures—let alone personalities—differed, the scene could have unfolded in a variety of ways.

Organizations and institutions also play roles in social life. For example, a restaurant chain's primary role is to provide food service, usually while earning a profit. A political party's primary role is to govern a nation in accordance with its ideological beliefs. The health care system's primary role is to treat the ill and maintain people's wellness. But a critical lens, filter, and angle on these institutions can reveal how their rules affect their roles. Certainly, the health care system provides essential support to patients in need, but the rules of its organizational structure can influence whether its role is charitable or profit driven. The pharmaceutical industry in the United States promotes its public role as the creator of innovative medicines to make people's lives better. But the news media, in their role as social informants, often present investigative reports that the pharmaceutical industry's private role is also to generate exorbitant profits for its executives and shareholders. Institutional roles can be multiple and conflicting, and their rules and relationships with society are always established by people.

As researchers observe and analyze life, they pay attention to the roles humans assume (or are assigned) and the accompanying actions that seem to correspond with them as they transfigure from one role to another. Qualitative researchers pay

**FIGURE 1.4** ● Humans interact through their roles and relationships.



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particular attention to the dynamics of status and rule-making/rule-breaking during interactions between people. They detect how a role is composed of particular facets of character and society that together constitute a perceived identity.

**Relationships.** When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine how people act, react, and especially interact with each other in various social contexts. **Relationships** vary in quality, depending on the attitude one holds toward another person, group, or institution. The closeness to or distance from others is perceived by the individual, and the degree of belong-

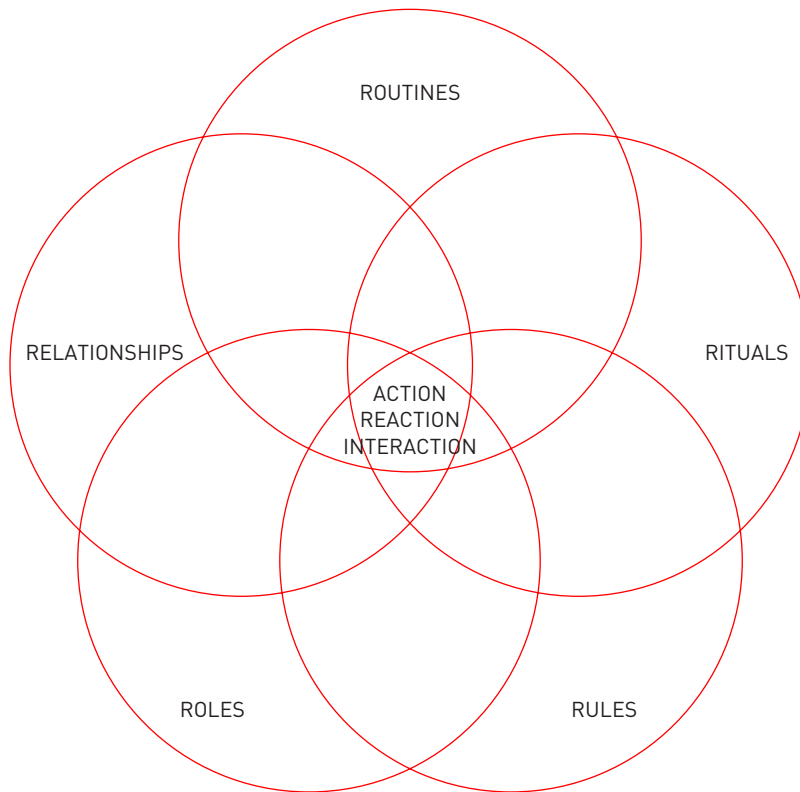
ing says much about the culturally constructed sense of community, family, group, membership, and so on. And relationships are dynamic, meaning they “are multiple, can be fluid, and change at different rates” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 107).

The roles people assume, to a significant degree, influence and affect the types of relationships they have with others, who are also in their own roles with their own perceptions of relationship status. Students assembled in a classroom with a teacher will jointly construct relationship dynamics that can vary from intimidating and toxic, to impersonal and businesslike, to nurturing and joyous. People’s perceptions of a nation’s leaders will also influence and affect a citizenry’s attitudes toward and interactions with their government, and establish an **ethos** or cultural pulse. Examine Figure 1.4 and describe the inferred relationship dynamics between the two people in the photo.

In the restaurant scene above, the interactions between the customers and server seem perfunctory yet pleasant. Exceptions to the menu rules were requested, not demanded. The server appears to cultivate a relationship that accommodates the desires of the diners, affirming any requests and changes in protocol. With roles come expectations, and the pleasantries of the server seem obligatory, yet they initiate courteous, interactive responses or reactions from the customers, who were not required to be polite but were motivated to do so by her positive demeanor and acquiescence.

Robert V. Kozinets (2020) offers that digital technology has reconfigured peoples’ live and online relationships into “networked individualism” in which they are connected rather than embedded in social groups. The internet is a “new neighborhood” where home and work, and the public and private, are intertwined. “Human beings and our technologies are part of a single and interrelated system” (p. 116).

**FIGURE 1.5** ● The individual in social interaction experiences a tightly interwoven nucleus of action, reaction, and interaction patterns within the interrelated five Rs.



Social memberships are now partial rather than permanent, with more specialized peer-to-peer relationships. “Networked individuals move easily between relationships and social settings to construct their own complex identities, depending on their passion, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, media habits, subcultural inclinations and other personal characteristics” (p. 123). As researchers investigate relationships, they reflect on how the digital technology many people use every day influences and affects the quality of individuals’ connections and networks.

Interaction is how relationships get constructed. They are collective chains of actions and reactions in which people in roles conduct routines and rituals in accordance with rules for living. Not every social interaction is equitable, however. People

have different goals and objectives for themselves and for others. These complex interaction patterns are what qualitative researchers attempt to discover in order to answer why people do the things they do. Figure 1.5 (p. 19) is our best attempt at visually illustrating the individual in social context—a tightly interwoven nucleus of action, reaction, and interaction patterns within the interrelated five Rs.

As researchers observe human action as it naturally occurs around them (including action online), or listen to people recounting their experiences and perceptions during an interview, they stay attuned to their collective interactions happening in the moment or as they recall them. Not only do fieldworkers carefully document their back-and-forth exchanges, they also analyze those exchanges for their explicit and implicit meanings. How one person relates with others reveals much about his own role identity and values, attitudes, and beliefs.

## On Qualitative Data Analysis—and Life

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Research methodologist Michael Quinn Patton (2015) posits, “Because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique” (p. 522). We frontload readers with this principle early because many students in research courses seek, and probably also need, explicit procedures for the “correct” way to conduct qualitative data analysis. Although it is possible to make errors that deviate too far from accepted practices, there really is no one “right” way to analyze qualitative data.

Nevertheless, there are some established guidelines and methods available for this mode of inquiry. The analytic methods chosen depend on several factors, including the forms of data collected (discussed in Chapters 2–5), the methodological genre employed and the types of research questions posed (discussed in Chapters 6–7), the types of participants studied and the parameters for investigation (Chapter 8), and a variety of other matters including the researcher’s own comfort level with particular analytic approaches (Chapters 9–10) and the form a final presentation takes (Chapters 11–12). Analysis does not start after all the data have been collected. Analysis is an ongoing process from beginning through end of an inquiry. Remember that qualitative researchers work inductively, constructing questions when a topic first emerges for possible investigation, then constructing answers as fieldwork progresses, data emerge, and the report is composed.

Though we emphasize qualitative data analysis from the very beginning of this book, we cannot possibly cover everything there is to know about the subject in just one chapter. Instead, we distribute throughout this text methods of analysis as they relate to the particular topics discussed. Think of analysis as a **through-line**—that is, a thematic thread that weaves throughout the research endeavor or extended experience. It is our goal that each chapter cumulatively builds within readers a series of techniques and skills. We prefer not to think of these collected strategies as a toolkit or recipe book. Instead, we think of these methods collectively as a compendium of

analytic knowledge, a repertoire of analytic skills, or even a mental rolodex of methods accessed on an as-relevant basis (Saldaña, 2015).

As for analyzing life, we acknowledge that that is a formidable task, especially in an era when buzzwords such as *complexity*, *messiness*, *ambiguity*, *uncertainty*, and *troubling the data* appear in selected philosophical approaches to inquiry. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, artists, poets, playwrights, and everyday citizens of the world have been trying to analyze life ever since people could conceptualize that something puzzling about human existence needed to be answered. One would think that with the millennia of knowledge humans have accumulated as a species, people would have figured out how to live ideally by now. But the human race has still not “gotten it right.” There are too many conflicts, too many unanswered questions, too many unsolved problems, and too many unresolved issues.

Research is one way of reflecting deeply on the human condition, and there are multiple methods to help gather the information needed to make substantive insights and revelations. But we also acknowledge that methods alone are insufficient. We take counsel from case study methodologist Robert E. Stake (1995), who wisely offers that “Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (p. 19). It is our hope that this book might help readers sharpen the thinking skills needed to analyze life in its multifaceted complexity.

## Closure and Transition

Qualitative researchers and data analysts should possess five fundamental skills. They

1. Condense large amounts of data;
2. Notice patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials;
3. Unify seemingly different things;
4. Understand social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction; and
5. Interpret routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life (the five Rs).

These analytic skills will be utilized as additional techniques for qualitative inquiry are learned. They

serve the researcher through all phases, stages, and cycles of the process, from literature reviews through fieldwork observations, and from research question development through final write-up.

*Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life* takes a pragmatic stance toward investigation. We believe it's important for novices to know the craft of research before they tackle the art or design of it. Thus, the next chapter focuses on what is considered one of the primary ways many researchers learn about the social world: observing people in patterns of action, reaction, and interaction in natural settings as they go about their routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships.

## Resources for an Introduction to Qualitative Analysis

The following resources offer additional guidance for an introduction to social inquiry:

Abbott, Andrew. (2004). *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. Norton.

Becker, Howard S. (1998). *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*. University of Chicago Press.

Saldaña, Johnny. (2015). *Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind*. SAGE.

## Analytic Exercises

1. Visit the Remote Associates Test website and complete several exercises to develop your pattern recognition skills: [www.remote-associates-test.com/](http://www.remote-associates-test.com/)
2. In one household room, list up to 30 things you see that have patterns to them or on them (e.g., stripes on a pillow, pleats on a curtain), objects that are multiple (e.g., 25 books shelved horizontally), and overall organizational patterns (e.g., all furniture pieces pushed against the wall).
3. Visit a public social space such as a movie theater lobby, fast food restaurant, or shopping mall. Simply observe and listen for approximately 15 minutes to the actions, reactions, and interactions of people. Stay particularly attuned to how people react to someone else's dialogue in conversation.
4. Write a list of your typical activities done throughout an average week (a minimum of 30 different actions). Separate the list into three columns: actions you consider routines, actions you consider rituals, and as the center column, actions that are both or variable (i.e., it depends). Reflect why you consider the actions in the ritual column ritualistic, and why the central column's contents vary.
5. Visit a public social space such as a movie theater lobby, fast food restaurant, or shopping mall. Look for any posted signage that explicitly states rules of conduct in the space (e.g., "No smoking," "Only service animals allowed"). Then observe what forms of tacit (i.e., socially understood) rules of conduct are exhibited by people in the space.
6. Reflect on and discuss with others how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed daily actions, reactions, and interactions, plus its influences and affects on people's routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships.

## Sample Data for Analysis

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Colin, a former employee of a movie theater discussing his job responsibilities. (Additional portions from the complete interview will be discussed in later chapters. The complete transcript can be downloaded from the book's companion website at <https://edge.sagepub.com/saldanaomasta2e>.)

Read and reflect on the transcript excerpt and apply one or more of the five fundamental analytic skills to these data. Possible applications include

Condensing large amounts of data: Condense this excerpt to one third its length, selecting and retaining only the most salient passages. Or underline, circle, or highlight the most significant words/phrases to you to compose an initial set of In Vivo Codes.

Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials: Identify what occurs or what is discussed more than twice in this data excerpt.

Unifying seemingly different things: Interrelate the different patterns observed in the data.

Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction: Describe what forms of action and reaction the participant takes, and what types of interactions occur between him and others.

Interpreting routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life: Identify one or more of these five facets as discussed by the participant.

**INTERVIEWER:** In general, at that particular job, how did you personally approach customer service? In terms of policies and what you actually did, what were your mind-set and actions in terms of customer service?

**COLIN:** Sure. I am very adamant on customer service. Cleanliness is a big thing. I mean, they trained us on all these things, but even my own values and practices kind of seep through. I was always very apologetic. I like to keep the policies, and even though there were managers that had conflicting thoughts, I tried hard to be accommodating to whoever was supervising me.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was there ever a time when you were unable to give a customer something they wanted or meet a request of theirs because it conflicted with a policy? A time where somebody wanted something and you were not able to provide that?

**COLIN:** Absolutely. Absolutely. So, our drinks specifically were nonrefillable, and there were many guests who came back and said, "Can I have a refill?" or, "Oops. I spilled this drink. Could I get a refill?" and because of policy we can't. Because that's just what they tell us to do. We can't give refills on drinks, even if they spill them.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you think of any specific examples of a time where somebody came back and said that, and how you responded?

**COLIN:** Sure. What comes to mind, actually, was it, was a group of teenage girls, and they had bought a large drink and a large popcorn—and large popcorns get refills, but not drinks—and right after ordering it, almost three feet away, the

girl dropped her drink, and it went scattering. And they came up, and they were like, “Oh my goodness. Can I get a refill?” Because of policy, I had to say, “Unfortunately, we don’t do refills. I could sell you another drink.” And they were a little discouraged because they were thinking about the drink on the ground, and they felt like it was an accident. They luckily didn’t push anything too much. I think they got a medium drink after that, but they were a little discouraged by the fact that I couldn’t just refill their spilled drink.

**INTERVIEWER:** Any other times? Any other situations where somebody asked way beyond that? Where a customer was more dissatisfied by that?

**COLIN:** I mean, it was a policy that lots of employees had issues with because it wasn’t consistent. Some employees let them have it, and so there was one time when—not with me, but the person next to me—where he came back for a refill, and he made this big fuss about how, “The last time I was here, I had refills. This is garbage. Let me talk to your assistant manager.” And we went and got the manager, and the manager explained and apologized, saying they couldn’t give them a refill. But it never got violent. It was just very loud noises. It was very disgruntled kind of yelling.

**INTERVIEWER:** How did the customer feel at the end of the situation, do you think? What did they express?

**COLIN:** That’s a good question. I do not know the ending of that story. All I know is that they didn’t get what they wanted, and they made a big fuss, and then they went back to the theater. That’s all I’ve heard. They might have done more afterwards, but . . .

**INTERVIEWER:** In general, do you have any thoughts on how you personally might have navigated any differences between a customer’s expectation—what they wanted—and the policies? What were some of your thoughts on that topic?

**COLIN:** Well, that’s tough because they advertise customer service first, but then some of the policies are more on the business side and less on the customer’s side. So how I, I always try to be cordial. I always try to approach the circumstances, try to do everything I possibly could, based on the policies, but due to the fact that I am employed and getting paid by them, I made sure to keep the policies of selling, and not giving refills, and making sure that you’re checking ID for seventeen and younger, and so forth.

**INTERVIEWER:** What do you think about policies like that? For example, the girls who spilled their drink in front of you, and it was clear they spilled it and didn’t drink it. How do you think if you were the employer, if you were the person making the decision, how would you have handled that?



**COLIN:**

That's a good question. I would first have to analyze the situation. I'd have to see how many people are around because, like, if there were lots of people around and you gave out a free refill, even though it went against your policy normally, other people might use that excuse to get more drinks, which I could see on the business end not being good. But, in their scenario, where nobody was around, I don't think it would have taken that much just to refill them, or even get a new cup and just not charge them, considering it was an accident. It was a clear accident. You saw it happen, and, you know, things like that happen.



# Analyzing Field Sites

## Learning Objectives

After reading and reviewing this chapter, researchers should be able to

1. Describe methods of conducting and documenting observations of social life in natural settings,
2. Demonstrate familiarity with participant observation of social life, and
3. Explain the analytic processes involved with field notes.

## Introduction

One of the best ways to analyze life is to witness and experience it in all its rich detail. **Participant observation** is the researcher's method for watching and listening to people act, react, and interact in natural social settings, most often during everyday matters but sometimes during special circumstances. As humans go about their lives, researchers analyze people's movements, conversations, and environments to discern what, how, in what ways, and/or why they do the things they do. Researchers document their routines, rituals, and rules for reference and analysis, along with interpretations of their roles and relationships with one another.

Systematic participant observation has its roots in anthropology when different world and national cultures were studied in the early 20th century and documented in writing and sometimes photography and film (Brinkmann, Jacobsen, & Kristiansen, 2014). The goal of these studies was to present just enough rich data to give readers a sense that they were there at the sites themselves. The traditions of those early

methods have evolved, but the basic goal remains the same: to observe and analyze humans as they live their lives in a variety of social settings.

Participant observation is not necessary for every qualitative study. In fact, most qualitative research with adults uses interviews to obtain participant perspectives (Roulston, deMarrais, & Lewis, 2003, p. 646). It can be wise, however, to observe people first at a specific site where they work or gather who may be interviewed later. It can stimulate specific questions for the interview (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) and better inform the researcher about the participant's five Rs and cultural milieu. Also, studies whose topics or research questions focus specifically on the dynamics of human interaction, or settings where interviewing is not possible with those observed, lend themselves to this data collection method.

Participant observation can be conducted in conjunction with interviews and other data collection procedures to enhance the total database or **data corpus**, also referred to as an **archive**. Sometimes what participants offer during interviews contradicts what they say and do in natural contexts. This leads researchers to more carefully analyze and reconcile the discrepancies. Participant observation can also stimulate topics or specific questions for continued fieldwork at a later time.

Two new terms require brief explanation here: method and methodology. A **method** is how you go about doing something. A **methodology** is why you're going about it in a particular way. The "how to" ways of participant observation are described below and include techniques such as writing field notes and recording audio and/or video of natural life. The "why" of participant observation is to provide the researcher a real-time, uncensored view of the social world to more credibly analyze how humans go about their lives. Consent processes for and the ethics of conducting participant observation will be discussed in Chapter 8. In this chapter, we focus on method.

## On Culture

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**Culture** and its related terms—subculture, microculture, counterculture, and so on—are a bit slippery to explain. Even anthropologists have no consensus; hundreds of definitions for the core term exist, and the culture concept today is perceived as unstable, random, and unpredictable. Many descriptions, however, include knowledge as a key component of what culture is: "*knowledge that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience. . . . It is social knowledge, not knowledge unique to an individual*" (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005, pp. 5–6; emphasis in original).

Culture is not a static "thing" that can be observed directly. Rather, it is an ever-evolving process, system, abstraction, concept, and even performance. Culture is constructed and interpreted by researchers through observing groups of people's particular actions, language, social practices, and routines (i.e., their norms and traditions), tacit or hidden rules for conduct, and rituals and ceremonies that produce and reproduce what the group "is" during a particular span of time (Chirkov, 2016;

Duhigg, 2016; Gobo & Molle, 2017). We characterize culture broadly as the participants' site-specific ways of working and living with others:

As individuals we have multiple affiliations, whether voluntary or not, with different groups of people. Our types of belonging shape and are shaped by our social interactions with [others]. Researchers observe the particular forms of acting, reacting, and interacting that happen in particular settings in order to document in what ways these occur. The composite combination of unique interactions and the values, attitudes, and beliefs embedded within them help us identify and formulate what is “cultural” about the specific site and its members. (Saldaña, 2015, p. 101)

To clarify the sometimes hazy difference between society and culture, the latter is part of the former. Charon (2013) defines a **society** as “a social organization of people who share a history, a culture, a structure, a set of social institutions, usually a language, and an identity” (p. 340). The people within a society assume or perform its cultures.

One of the ways a fieldworker describes a culture is through what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) promoted as **thick description**, an approach that does not imply lengthy narratives but a written interpretation of the nuances, complexity, and significance of a people's actions. By focusing on selected but rich details of what researchers experientially witness, they can reflect on and hopefully render an account that provides insightful knowledge for readers about a social group's interrelationship dynamics. C. J. Pascoe's (2007) ethnography, *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, explores not just male homophobia but also the spectrum and interplay of heterosexuality, homosexuality, gender, race, bodies, sex, identity, and their interwoven ritual performance and reproduction in high school culture.

Researching a people's five Rs offers a template for documenting unique aspects of their ways of life, and participant observation is a most suitable method for conducting **ethnography**, the study of a culture. Ethnography is not the sole focus of this book, but the fieldwork components described below offer guidance for research in that genre, discussed further in Chapter 6. In this chapter, classroom culture is profiled through examples.

## Observation Settings

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Participant observation happens somewhere, and it is the “where” (and people populating that “where”) that provides optimal opportunities to gather data to inform a research study. If one's topic is teaching and learning, a classroom is an ideal site. Health care studies might observe patients in hospitals, clinics, or in their homes. For studies of immigration issues between the United States and Mexico, observations of border patrol agents working in California, Arizona, New Mexico, and/or Texas might be in order. Recent studies in qualitative inquiry have even explored the

technological worlds of online gaming and social media as digital cultures. Perhaps the site itself intrigues you and motivates an extended study, as the street vendors on New York City sidewalks did for sociologist Mitchell Duneier (1999). A setting of natural social action, reaction, and interaction provides detailed moments for observation and analysis.

## Finding a place and space

Sometimes the physical setting itself is important, and other times it's the specific people who just happen to be living or working in a particular setting that determines where researchers go. Regardless, researchers first look for and scout out possible locations for fieldwork. **Fieldwork** is the research act of observing social life in a specific setting and recording it in some way for analytic reference. Being a fieldworker, or "in the field," is a researcher's placement and immersion among particular people in a particular environment for close examination.

Public places such as shopping malls and restaurants contain large collections of people, but these people are clustered in small groups without a single focus of attention for everyone. These open-ended settings require researchers to continually scan and mingle among the crowd to observe the varying pools and flows of social action. Ambient noise and multiple simultaneous conversations can also make listening difficult.

Large gatherings like concerts and sporting events, or smaller settings like offices, however, are close-ended with a central and more purposeful focus for attention by the participants and are thus generally easier to observe and document. However, some close-ended settings like small elementary school classrooms can have a myriad number of activities to document. Fewer people does not always make participant observation easier, but the collective or majority reactions to a central point of action are easier to take in.

Madden (2017) wisely notes that "the field" is most often not a single bounded location but a multisite network that is "part geographical, part social, and part mental construct" (p. 52). Most people interact in a number of different settings. For example, children's social worlds usually include their homes, school busses, several classrooms, lunchrooms, playgrounds, stores, streets, friends' houses, parks, perhaps extracurricular activities in commercial gyms or soccer fields, and so on. Some children may interact with others through mobile devices and apps such as FaceTime and Snapchat, or virtually with peers through online video gaming. One female researcher observed and interviewed a female adolescent as a case study at the student's school, a community center where she took classes, and in the teenager's bedroom, which gave the researcher a unique opportunity to look at the furnishings, decor, and mementos the student collected.

## Access

This brings up the topic of **access** for participant observation—a researcher's ability and permission to observe at a particular site. A female researcher in a teenage girl's bedroom was possible because she received permission from the girl's mother.

But a male researcher might not have received such access. Access comes from **gatekeepers**—people with the authority to grant permission and facilitate the researcher's entry into particular field settings. Adult gatekeepers at schools might include principals, teachers, and parents. Even children themselves might function as gatekeepers if the leaders of cliques approve and support (or do not) a fieldworker's presence among their circle of friends. Gatekeepers can sometimes be key participants themselves because they can either consent to or reject the researcher's presence in their lives. Publicly accessible spaces such as coffee shops do not have gatekeepers, but they do have rules: anyone who enters must display proper dress and decorum and, more often than not, must patronize the business by purchasing something.

At field settings requiring gatekeeper review, researchers should meet with those individuals and explain the purpose of their study. They should present themselves professionally yet humbly as people who value the opportunity to learn from an experience and to benefit others who could be interested in their research topic. They must negotiate any understandings, ways of working, and restrictions (e.g., no review of filed paper documents, no intrusive distractions to participants during work). Students observing for a research methods class project should openly admit that and offer that the field experience is part of their educational development since their primary goal is to learn about, from, and with others. Some settings require that fieldworkers maintain some sort of credential like a fingerprint/security clearance card or successful completion of a volunteer training program before they work with particular groups. Written and signed letters of agreement explaining the project guarantee fewer misunderstandings and miscommunications between the researcher and the site's primary gatekeepers.

## The Observer's Frames

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Participant observers bring who they are into the field site. And they must adopt various roles, positions, standpoints, and perspectives as they watch others conduct their lives. This section explores some of the frames or stances of the observer in relation to the participants and the purpose of the study.

### Lenses, filters, and angles for fieldwork

Participant observation databases consist primarily of both narrative and visual materials, but what does one specifically look for or at? Researchers are like cameras and their eyes like **lenses**. The way researchers perceive social life can be influenced and affected by their own significant demographic attributes such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and/or occupation. Lenses might also consist of the particular research methodology or disciplinary approach employed for a study (educational, sociological, psychological, etc.).

Cameras also have **filters** covering their lenses that let certain wavelengths in and keep others out. The filters that cover a researcher's lens might consist of a set of personal values, attitudes, and beliefs about the world, formed by her unique personal

biography, learned experiences, and individual thinking patterns. Researchers' identities as human beings will influence and affect what they observe in the field site since we tend to interpret others' experiences based on our own. Filters also consist of particular theoretical perspectives or **standpoints** within a discipline—for example, feminist, critical, emancipatory. Some educators, for example, might place more emphasis on schooling as guided by sets of national standards, while others prefer more student-centered and individualized instructional designs. Researchers' filters can literally prevent them from seeing/noticing elements in field sites, so it is important for researchers to be aware of their own filters.

Cameras are also placed at particular **angles**, suggesting not just panoramic and close-up views but also a researcher's relational **positionality** as a peripheral, active, complete, and/or covert member, in addition to her interpretations of social action she sees and hears at the **micro-level** (local and particular), **meso-level** (cultural, national, or mid-range), and/or **macro-level** (global, universal, or conceptual) of life. Researchers zoom in and out throughout the course of observations to get varied perspectives of the social scene, varying from insider to outsider, from intimate to distant, or from emotionally invested to neutrally detached.

The lenses, filters, and angles of researchers' personal worldviews work in conjunction with their research topics and questions to help guide and focus fieldwork observations (see Figure 2.1). A female researcher and a male researcher may observe and interpret a women's support group differently. A gay man and a heterosexual fundamentalist Christian man might observe a gay pride festival in very different ways. An older Hispanic and a young African American may interpret U.S. immigration issues differently, and so on. This is not to suggest that researchers with particular demographic backgrounds are more competent or better qualified to observe the nuances of social action among similar people; on the contrary, sometimes an outsider to a social group can perceive things that an insider takes for granted. Researchers should, however, always consciously reflect on how their standpoint and positionality influence and affect what is interpreted through their lenses, filters, and angles.

**Subjectivity**, the researcher's personal and unfettered perspective, is unavoidable in qualitative research. It is a human dimension that is both an advantage and liability to fieldworkers. Subjectivity permits researchers to respond to data in ways that generate emotion-laden and meaningful interpretations about the social world. If research consists solely of subjective opinions, however, such as first

**FIGURE 2.1** ● A fieldworker's positionality has a lens, filter, and angle, comparable to a camera.

