

Chapter 10 Qualitative Data Analysis



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Learning Objectives

1. Explain the meaning of an emic focus and of an etic focus in research and their relevance to qualitative data analysis.
2. Compare and contrast the use of narrative analysis and conversation analysis.
3. Describe the grounded theory approach and its role in data collection.
4. Identify changes in the social world that have led to the growth of visual sociology.
5. Give an example of the value of using more than one method of analyzing qualitative data in a project.
6. Discuss the ways in which computer-aided qualitative data analysis can facilitate research.
7. List three ethical issues that should be given special attention in qualitative data analysis.

I was at lunch standing in line and he [another male student] came up to my face and started saying stuff and then he pushed me. I said . . . I'm cool with you, I'm your friend and then he push me again and calling me names. I told him to stop pushing me and then he push me hard and said something about my mom. And then he hit me, and I hit him back. After he fell I started kicking him.

—Calvin Morrill et al. (2000: 521)

A student writing an in-class essay about conflicts in which he had participated made this statement. It was written for a team of social scientists who were studying conflicts in high schools to better understand their origins and to inform prevention policies.

In qualitative data analysis, the raw data to be analyzed are text—words—rather than numbers. In the high school conflict study by Calvin Morrill and his colleagues (2000), there were initially no variables or hypotheses. The use of text, not numbers, and the (initial) absence of variables are just two of the ways in which qualitative analysis differs from quantitative analysis.

In this chapter, we present and illustrate the features that most qualitative analyses share. There is no one correct way to analyze textual data. To quote Michael Quinn Patton (2002), “Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings. No formula exists for that transformation. Guidance, yes. But no recipe. Direction can and

will be offered, but the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at” (p. 432).

We first discuss different types of qualitative analyses and then describe computer programs used for qualitative data analysis. You will see that these increasingly popular programs are blurring the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative approaches to textual analysis.

What Is Distinctive About Qualitative Data Analysis?

The focus on text—on qualitative data rather than on numbers—is the most important feature of **qualitative data analysis**. The “text” that qualitative researchers analyze is most often transcripts of interviews or notes from participant observation sessions, but the term can also refer to pictures or other images that the researcher examines.

Qualitative data analysis:

Techniques used to search and code textual, aural, and pictorial data and to explore relationships among the resulting categories.

What can one learn from a text? There are two kinds of answers to this question. Some researchers view textual analysis as a way to understand what participants “really” thought or felt or did in some situation or at some point in time. The text becomes a way to get “behind the numbers” that are recorded in a quantitative analysis to see the richness of real social experience. In this approach, interviews or field studies can, for instance, illuminate what survey respondents really meant by their answers.

Other qualitative researchers, however, have adopted a *hermeneutic* perspective on texts, viewing interpretations as never totally true or false. The text has many possible interpretations (Patton 2002: 114). The meaning of a text, then, is negotiated among a community of interpreters, and to the extent that some agreement is reached about meaning at a particular time and place, that meaning can only be based on consensual community validation. From the hermeneutic perspective, a researcher constructs a “reality” with his interpretations of a text provided by the subjects of research; other researchers with different backgrounds could come to markedly different conclusions.

Qualitative and quantitative data analyses, then, differ in the priority given to the views of the subjects of the research versus those of the researcher. Qualitative data analysts seek to capture the setting or people who produced this text on their own terms rather than in terms of predefined (by researchers) measures and hypotheses. So, qualitative data analysis tends typically to be inductive—the analyst identifies important categories in the data, as well as patterns and relationships, through a process of discovery. There are often no predefined measures or hypotheses. Anthropologists term this an **emic focus**, which means representing the setting in terms of the participants, rather than an **etic focus**, in which the setting and its participants are represented in terms that the researcher brings to the study.

Good qualitative data analyses focus on the interrelated aspects of the setting or group, or person, under investigation—the case—rather than breaking the whole up into separate parts. The whole is always understood to be greater than the sum of its parts, so the social context of events, thoughts, and actions becomes essential for interpretation. Within this framework, it doesn’t really make sense to focus on two variables out of an interacting set of influences and test the relationship between just those two variables.

Emic focus:

Representing a setting with the participants’ terms.

Etic focus:

Representing a setting with the researcher's terms.

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative and reflexive process that begins as data are being collected rather than after data collection has ceased (Stake 1995). Next to her field notes or interview transcripts, the qualitative analyst jots down ideas about the meaning of the text and how it might relate to other issues. This process of reading through the data and interpreting it continues throughout the project. When it appears that additional concepts need to be investigated or new relationships explored, the analyst adjusts the data collection. This process is termed **progressive focusing** (Parlett and Hamilton 1976).

We emphasize placing an interpreter in the field to observe the workings of the case, one who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings. Initial research questions may be modified or even replaced in mid-study by the case researcher. The aim is to thoroughly understand [the case]. If early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design is changed. (Stake 1995: 9)

Progressive focusing:

The process by which a qualitative analyst interacts with the data and gradually refines his or her focus.

Elijah Anderson (2003) describes the progressive focusing process in his memoir about his study of Jelly's Bar:

I also wrote conceptual memos to myself to help me sort out my findings. Usually not more than a page long, they represented theoretical insights that emerged from my engagement with the data in my field notes. As I gained tenable hypotheses and propositions, I began to listen and observe selectively, focusing in on those events that I thought might bring me alive to my research interests and concerns. This method of dealing with the information I was receiving amounted to a kind of dialogue with the data, sifting out ideas, weighing new notions against the reality with which I [was] faced there on the streets and back at my desk. (pp. 235–236)

Following a few guidelines will help when a researcher starts analyzing qualitative data (Miller and Crabtree 1999):

- Know yourself—your biases and preconceptions.
- Know your question.
- Seek creative abundance. Consult others and keep looking for alternative interpretations.
- Be flexible.
- Exhaust the data. Try to account for all the data in the texts, then publicly acknowledge the unexplained and remember the next principle.
- Celebrate anomalies. They are the windows to insight.
- Get critical feedback. The solo analyst is a great danger to self and others.
- Be explicit. Share the details with yourself, your team members, and your audiences. (pp. 142–143)

Qualitative Data Analysis as an Art

If you miss the certainty of predefined measures and deductively derived hypotheses, you are beginning to understand the difference between quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Qualitative data analysis is even described by some as involving as much “art” as science—as a “dance.” In the words of William Miller and Benjamin Crabtree (1999),

Interpretation is a complex and dynamic craft, with as much creative artistry as technical exactitude, and it requires an abundance of patient plodding, fortitude, and discipline. There are many changing rhythms; multiple steps; moments of jubilation, revelation, and exasperation. . . . The dance of interpretation is a dance for two, but those two are often multiple and frequently changing, and there is always an audience, even if it is not always visible. Two dancers are the interpreters and the texts. (pp. 138–139)

The “dance” of qualitative data analysis captures the alternation between immersion in the text to identify meanings and editing the text to create categories and codes. The process involves three steps in reading the text:

1. When the researcher reads the text literally, he or she is focused on its literal content and form; the text “leads” the dance.
2. Then the researcher reads the text reflexively, focusing on how his or her own orientation shapes interpretations and focus. Now, the researcher leads the dance.
3. Finally, the researcher reads the text interpretively; the researcher tries to construct his or her own interpretation of what the text means. (Miller and Crabtree 1999: 138–139)

In this artful way, analyzing text involves both inductive and deductive processes: The researcher generates concepts and linkages between them based on reading the text and checks the text to see whether his concepts and interpretations are reflected in it.

Qualitative Compared With Quantitative Data Analysis

With these points in mind, let’s review the differences of the logic behind qualitative versus quantitative analysis. Qualitative data analysis has the following characteristics (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 8–10; Patton 2002: 13–14):

- A focus on meanings rather than on quantifiable phenomena
- Collection of much data on a few cases rather than little data on many cases
- Study in depth and detail, without predetermined categories or directions, rather than emphasis on analyses and categories determined in advance
- Conception of the researcher as an “instrument” rather than as the designer of objective instruments to measure particular variables
- Sensitivity to context rather than seeking universal generalizations
- Attention to the impact of the researcher’s and others’ values on the course of the analysis, rather than

presuming the possibility of value-free inquiry

- A goal of rich descriptions of the world rather than measurement of specific variables

Of course, even the most qualitative textual data can also be transposed to quantitative data through a process of categorization and counting. Some qualitative analysts also share with quantitative researchers a positivist goal of describing the world as it “really” is, but others have adopted a postmodern hermeneutic goal of trying to understand how different people see and make sense of the world, without believing that there is one uniquely correct description.

What Techniques Do Qualitative Data Analysts Use?

Most approaches to qualitative data analysis take five steps:

1. Documentation of the data and data collection
2. Conceptualization and coding
3. Examining relationships to show how one concept may influence another
4. Authenticating conclusions by evaluating alternative explanations, disconfirming evidence, and searching for negative cases
5. Reflexivity

The analysis of qualitative research notes begins in the field at the time of observation or interviewing, as the researcher identifies problems and concepts that appear likely to help in understanding the situation. Simply reading the notes or transcripts is an important step in the analytic process. Researchers should make frequent notes in the margins to identify important statements and to propose ways of coding the data: “husband/wife conflict,” perhaps, or “tension reduction strategy.”

An interim stage may consist of listing the concepts developed in the notes and perhaps diagramming the relationships among concepts (Maxwell 1996: 78–81). In large projects, regular team meetings are an important part of this process. In her study of neighborhood police officers, Susan Miller’s (1999) research team met to go over their field notes and to resolve points of confusion, as well as to talk with other skilled researchers who helped identify emerging concepts:

The fieldwork team met weekly to talk about situations that were unclear and to troubleshoot any problems. We also made use of peer-debriefing techniques. Here, multiple colleagues, who were familiar with qualitative data analysis but not involved in our research, participated in preliminary analysis of our findings. (p. 233)

The back-and-forth of refining concepts usually continues throughout the entire qualitative research project.

Let’s examine each of the steps of qualitative analysis in more detail.

Documentation

The data for a qualitative study most often are notes jotted down in the field or during an interview or text

transcribed from audiotapes. "The basic data are these observations and conversations, the actual words of people reproduced to the best of my ability from the field notes" (Diamond 1992: 7). What to do with all this material? As mentioned in [Chapter 9](#), many novice researchers become overwhelmed by the quantity of information, and their research projects grind to a halt as a result.

Analysis is less daunting, however, if the researcher maintains a disciplined transcription schedule:

Usually, I wrote these notes immediately after spending time in the setting or the next day. Through the exercise of writing up my field notes, with attention to "who" the speakers and actors were, I became aware of the nature of certain social relationships and their positional arrangements within the peer group. (Anderson 2003: 235)

You can see Anderson's analysis already emerging from the simple process of taking notes.

The first formal analytical step is documentation. The various contacts, interviews, written documents, and notes all need to be saved and catalogued in some fashion. Documentation is critical to qualitative research for several reasons: It is essential for keeping track of what will be a rapidly growing volume of notes, tapes, and documents; it provides a way of developing an outline for the analytic process; and it encourages ongoing conceptualizing and strategizing about the text.

Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman (1994: 53) provide a good example of a contact summary form that was used to keep track of observational sessions in a qualitative study of a new school curriculum ([Exhibit 10.1](#)).

Exhibit 10.1 Example of a Contact Summary Form

Contact type:	Site:	Tindale
Visit <u> X </u>	Contact date:	11/28-29/99
Phone <u> </u>	Today's date:	12/26/99
(with whom)	Written by:	RLT

1. What were the main issues or themes that struck you in this contact?

Interplay between highly prescriptive, "teacher-proof" curriculum that is top-down imposed and the actual writing of the curriculum by the teachers themselves.

Split between the "watchdogs" (administrators) and the "house masters" (dept. chairs & teachers) vis-a-vis job force.

District curric. coord'r as decision maker re school's acceptance of research relationship.

2. Summarize the information you got (or failed to get) on each of the target questions you had for this contact.

Question	Information
History of dev. of innov'n	Conceptualized by Curric., Coord'r, English Chairman & Assoc. Chairman, written by teachers in summer, revised by teachers following summer with field testing data.
School's org'l structure	Principal & admin'rs responsible for discipline, dept chairs are educ'l leaders
Demographics	Racial conflicts in late 60s; 60% black stud. pop.; heavy emphasis on discipline & on keeping out non-district students slipping in from Chicago
Teachers' response to innov'n	Rigid, structured, etc. at first; now, they say they like it! NEEDS EXPLORATION
Research access	Very good; only restriction: teachers not required to cooperate

3. Anything else that struck you as salient, interesting, illuminating or important in this contact?

Thoroughness of the innov'n's development and training.

Its embeddedness in the district's curriculum, as planned and executed by the district curriculum coordinator.

The initial resistance to its high prescriptiveness (as reported by users) as contrasted with their current acceptance and approval of it (again, as reported by users).

4. What new (or remaining) target questions do you have in considering the next contact with this site?

How do users really perceive the innov'n? If they do indeed embrace it, what accounts for the change from early resistance?

Nature and amount of networking among users of innov'n.

Information on "stubborn" math teachers whose ideas weren't heard initially—who are they? Situation particulars? Resolution?

Follow-up on English teacher Reilly's "fall from the chairmanship."

Follow a team through a day of rotation, planning, etc.

CONCERN: The consequences of eating school cafeteria food two days per week for the next four or five months . . .

Stop

Source: Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Used with permission.

Conceptualization, Coding, and Categorizing

Identifying and refining important concepts is a key part of the iterative process of qualitative research. Sometimes conceptualization begins with a simple observation that is interpreted directly, "pulled apart," and then put back together more meaningfully. Robert Stake provides an example (1995):

When Adam ran a pushbroom into the feet of the children nearby, I jumped to conclusions about his interactions with other children: aggressive, teasing, arresting. Of course, just a few

minutes earlier I had seen him block the children climbing the steps in a similar moment of smiling bombast. So I was aggregating, and testing my unrealized hypotheses about what kind of kid he was, not postponing my interpreting. . . . My disposition was to keep my eyes on him. (p. 74)

The focus in this conceptualization “on the fly” is to provide a detailed description of what was observed and a sense of why it was important.

More often, analytic insights are tested against new observations; the initial statement of problems and concepts is refined; and the researcher then collects more data, interacts with it again, and the process continues. Anderson (2003) recounts how his conceptualization of social stratification at Jelly’s Bar developed over a long period:

I could see the social pyramid, how certain guys would group themselves and say in effect, “I’m here and you’re there.” I made sense of these crowds [initially] as the “respectables,” the “non-respectables,” and the “near-respectables.” . . . Inside, such non-respectables might sit on the crates, but if a respectable came along and wanted to sit there, the lower status person would have to move. (pp. 225–226)

But this initial conceptualization changed with experience as Anderson (2003: 230) realized that the participants themselves used other terms to differentiate social status: *winehead*, *boodlum*, and *regular*. What did they mean by these terms? “The ‘regulars’ basically valued ‘decency.’ They associated decency with conventionality but also with ‘working for a living,’ or having a ‘visible means of support’” (p. 231). In this way, Anderson progressively refined his concept as he gained experience in the setting.

Howard S. Becker (1958) provides another excellent illustration of this iterative process of conceptualization in his study of medical students:

When we first heard medical students apply the term “crock” to patients, we made an effort to learn precisely what they meant by it. We found, through interviewing students about cases both they and the observer had seen, that the term referred in a derogatory way to patients with many subjective symptoms but no discernible physical pathology. Subsequent observations indicated that this usage was a regular feature of student behavior and thus that we should attempt to incorporate this fact into our model of student-patient behavior. The derogatory character of the term suggested in particular that we investigate the reasons students disliked these patients. We found that this dislike was related to what we discovered to be the students’ perspective on medical school: the view that they were in school to get experience in recognizing and treating those common diseases most likely to be encountered in general practice. “Crocks,” presumably having no disease, could furnish no such experience. We were thus led to specify connections between the student-patient relationship and the student’s view of the purpose of his professional education. Questions concerning the genesis of this perspective led to discoveries about the organization of the student body and communication among students, phenomena which we had been assigning to another

[segment of the larger theoretical model being developed]. Since “crops” were also disliked because they gave the student no opportunity to assume medical responsibility, we were able to connect this aspect of the student-patient relationship with still another tentative model of the value system and hierarchical organization of the school, in which medical responsibility plays an important role. (p. 658)

In this excerpt, the researcher was first alerted to a concept by observations in the field, then refined his understanding of this concept by investigating its meaning. By observing the concept's frequency of use, he came to realize its importance. Finally, he incorporated the concept into an explanatory model of student-patient relationships.

Matrix:
A chart used to condense qualitative data into simple categories and provide a multidimensional summary that will facilitate subsequent, more intensive analysis.

A well-designed chart, or **matrix**, can facilitate the coding and categorization process. [Exhibit 10.2](#) shows an example of a coding form designed by Miles and Huberman (1994: 93–95) to represent the extent to which teachers and teachers’ aides (“users”) and administrators at a school gave evidence of various supporting conditions that indicated preparedness for a new reading program. The matrix condenses data into simple categories, reflects further analysis of the data to identify “degree” of support, and provides a multidimensional summary that will facilitate subsequent, more intensive analysis. Direct quotes still impart some of the flavor of the original text.

Exhibit 10.2 Example of Checklist Matrix

Presence of Supporting Conditions		
Condition	For Users	For Administrators
Commitment	<i>Strong</i> —"wanted to make it work."	<i>Weak</i> at building level. Prime movers in central office committed; others not.
Understanding	<i>"Basic"</i> ("felt I could do it, but I just wasn't sure how.") for teacher. <i>Absent</i> for aide ("didn't understand how we were going to get all this.")	<i>Absent</i> at building level and among staff. <i>Basic</i> for 2 prime movers ("got all the help we needed from developer.") <i>Absent</i> for other central office staff.
Materials	<i>Inadequate</i> : ordered late, puzzling ("different from anything I ever used"), discarded.	N.A.
Front-end training	<i>"Sketchy"</i> for teacher ("it all happened so quickly"); no demo class. <i>None</i> for aide ("totally unprepared. I had to learn along with the children.")	Prime movers in central office had training at developer site; none for others.
Skills	<i>Weak-adequate</i> for teacher. <i>"None"</i> for aide.	One prime mover (Robeson) skilled in substance; others unskilled.
Ongoing inservice	<i>None</i> , except for monthly committee meeting; no substitute funds.	<i>None</i>
Planning, coordination time	<i>None</i> : both users on other tasks during day; lab tightly scheduled, no free time.	<i>None</i>
Provisions for debugging	<i>None</i> systematized; spontaneous work done by users during summer.	<i>None</i>
School admin. support	Adequate	N.A.
Central admin. support	<i>Very strong</i> on part of prime movers.	Building admin. only acting on basis of central office commitment.
Relevant prior experience	<i>Strong</i> and useful in both cases: had done individualized instruction, worked with low achievers. But [the] aide [had] no diagnostic experience.	<i>Present</i> and useful in central office, esp. Robeson (specialist).

Source: Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Used with permission.

Examining Relationships and Displaying Data

Examining relationships is the centerpiece of the analytic process because it allows the researcher to move from simple description of the people and settings to explanations of why things happened as they did with those people in that setting. A matrix can show how different concepts are related or, perhaps, what causes are linked with what effects.

In [Exhibit 10.3](#), a matrix relates stakeholders' stake in a new program with the researcher's estimate of their attitude toward the program. Each cell of the matrix was to be filled in with a summary of an illustrative case study. In other matrix analyses, quotes might be included in the cells to represent the opinions of these different stakeholders, or the number of cases of each type might appear in the cells. The possibilities are almost endless. Keeping this approach in mind will generate many fruitful ideas for structuring a qualitative data analysis.

The simple relationships that are identified with a matrix like that shown in [Exhibit 10.3](#) can be examined and then extended to create a more complex causal model. Such a model can represent the multiple

relationships among the important explanatory constructs. A great deal of analysis must precede the construction of such a model with careful attention to identification of important variables and the evidence that suggests connections between them. [Exhibit 10.4](#) provides an example from a study of the implementation of a school program.

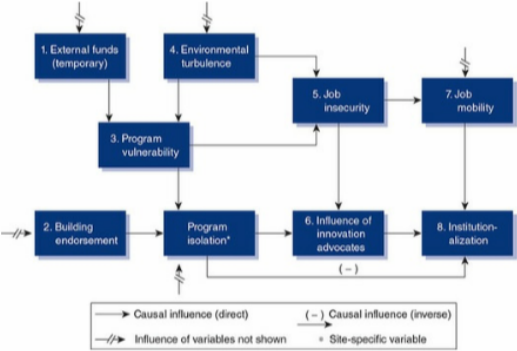
Exhibit 10.3 Coding Form for Relationships: Stakeholders' Stakes

	Estimate of Various Stakeholders' Inclination Toward the Program		
How high are the stakes for various primary stakeholders?	Favorable	Neutral or Unknown	Antagonistic
High			
Moderate			
Low			

Note: Construct illustrative case studies for each cell based on fieldwork.

Source: Patton, Michael Quinn. 2002. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods* 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Used with permission.

Exhibit 10.4 Example of a Causal Network Model



Source: Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*, 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Used with permission.

Authenticating Conclusions

No set standards exist for evaluating the validity or *authenticity* of conclusions in a qualitative study, but the need to consider carefully the evidence and methods on which conclusions are based is just as great as with other types of research. Individual items of information can be assessed using at least three criteria (Becker 1958):

1. How credible was the informant? Were statements made by someone with whom the researcher had a relationship of trust or by someone the researcher had just met? Did the informant have reason to lie? If the statements do not seem to be trustworthy as indicators of actual events, can they at least be used to help understand the informant's perspective?
2. Were statements made in response to the researcher's questions, or were they spontaneous? Spontaneous statements are more likely to indicate what would have been said had the researcher not been present.
3. How does the presence or absence of the researcher or the researcher's informant influence the actions and statements of other group members? Reactivity to being observed can never be ruled out as a possible explanation for some directly observed social phenomenon. However, if the researcher carefully compares what the informant says goes on when the researcher is not present, what the researcher observes directly, and what other group members say about their normal practices, the extent of reactivity can be assessed to some extent.

A qualitative researcher's conclusions should also be judged by his or her ability to explain credibly some aspect of social life. Explanations should capture group members' tacit knowledge of the social processes that were observed, not just their verbal statements about these processes. **Tacit knowledge**—"the largely unarticulated, contextual understanding that is often manifested in nods, silences, humor, and naughty nuances"—is reflected in participants' actions as well as their words and in what they fail to state but nonetheless feel deeply and even take for granted (Altheide and Johnson 1994: 492–493). These features are evident in William F. Whyte's (1955) analysis of Cornerville social patterns:

The corner-gang structure arises out of the habitual association of the members over a long period of time. The nuclei of most gangs can be traced back to early boyhood. . . . Home plays a very small role in the group activities of the corner boy. . . .

The life of the corner boy proceeds along regular and narrowly circumscribed channels. . . . Out of [social interaction within the group] arises a system of mutual obligations which is fundamental to group cohesion. . . . The code of the corner boy requires him to help his friends when he can and to refrain from doing anything to harm them. When life in the group runs smoothly, the obligations binding members to one another are not explicitly recognized. (pp. 255–257)

Tacit knowledge:

In field research, a credible sense of understanding of social processes that reflects the researcher's awareness of participants' actions, as well as their words, and of what they fail to state, feel deeply, and take for granted.

Comparing conclusions from a qualitative research project to those other researchers obtained by conducting similar projects can also increase confidence in their authenticity. Miller's 1999 study of neighborhood police officers (NPOs) found striking parallels in the ways they defined their masculinity to processes reported in research about males in nursing and other traditionally female jobs (as cited in Bachman and Schutt 2007):

Research That Matters



Many of my observations concern the workings of gender categories in social life. For example, I trace the evocation of gender in the organization of everyday interactions, and the shift from boys and girls as loose aggregations to "the boys" and "the girls" as self-aware, gender-based groups. In writing about these processes, I discovered that different angles of vision lurk within seemingly simple choices of language. How, for example, should one describe a group of children? A phrase like "six girls and three boys were chasing by the tires" already assumes the relevance of gender. An alternative description of the same event—"nine fourth-graders were chasing by the tires"—emphasizes age and downplays gender. Although I found no tidy solutions, I have tried to be thoughtful about such choices. . . . After several months of observing at Oceanside, I realized that my field notes were peppered with the words "child" and "children," but that the children themselves rarely used the term. "What do they call themselves?" I badgered in an entry in my field notes. The answer it turned out, is that children use the same practices as adults. They refer to one another by using given names ("Sally," "Jack") or language specific to a given context ("that guy on first base"). They rarely have occasion to use age-generic terms. But when pressed to locate themselves in an age-based way, my informants used "kids" rather than "children." (pp. 8–9)

Qualitative data analysts, more often than quantitative researchers, display real sensitivity to how a social situation or process is interpreted from a particular background and set of values and not simply based on the situation itself (Altheide and Johnson 1994). Researchers are only human, after all, and must rely on their own senses and process all information through their own minds. By reporting how and why they think they did what they did, they can help others determine whether, or how, the researchers' perspectives influenced their conclusions.

Anderson's (2003) memoir about the Jelly's Bar research illustrates the type of "tracks" that an ethnographer makes, as well as how the ethnographer can describe those tracks. Anderson acknowledges that his tracks began as a child:

While growing up in the segregated black community of South Bend, from an early age, I was curious about the goings on in the neighborhood, but particularly streets, and more particularly, the corner taverns that my uncles and my dad would go to hang out and drink in. . . . Hence, my selection of Jelly's as a field setting was a matter of my background, intuition, reason, and with a little bit of luck. (pp. 217–218)

After starting to observe at Jelly's, Anderson's (2003) "tracks" led to Herman:

After spending a couple of weeks at Jelly's, I met Herman and I felt that our meeting marked a big achievement. We would come to know each other well. . . . [He was] something of an informal leader at Jelly's. . . . We were becoming friends. . . . He seemed to genuinely like me, and he was one person I could feel comfortable with. (pp. 218–219)

Anderson's (2003) observations were shaped in part by Herman's perspective, but we also learn here that Anderson maintained some engagement with fellow students. This contact outside the bar helped to shape his analysis: "By relating my experiences to my fellow students, I began to develop a coherent perspective or a 'story' of the place which complemented the accounts that I had detailed in my accumulating field notes" (p. 220).

So, Anderson's analysis came in part from the way in which he "played his role" as a researcher and participant, not just from the setting itself.

What Are Some Alternatives in Qualitative Data Analysis?

The qualitative data analyst can choose from many interesting alternative approaches. Of course, the research question should determine the approach, but a researcher's preferences will also inevitably play a role as well. The alternative approaches we present here (grounded theory, narrative analysis, conversation analysis, and visual sociology) will give you a good sense of the possibilities (Patton 2002).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory involves building up, inductively and iteratively, a systematic theory that is grounded in empirical observations. The grounded theorist first summarizes some observations into conceptual categories, and then goes back and tests the coherence of these categories directly in the research setting with still more observations; refines the theory again, and so on. Over time, as the researcher refines and links the conceptual categories, a theory evolves (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Huberman and Miles 1994: 436). It's the back-and-forth of theory and research that gives grounded theory its distinctive flavor.

As observation, interviewing, and reflection proceed, grounded theory researchers refine their definitions of problems and concepts, then select specific indicators. They can then check the frequency and distribution of phenomena: How many people made a particular type of comment? How often did social interaction lead to arguments? Models may then be developed that specify the relationships between different phenomena. These models are modified as researchers gain experience in the setting. For the final analysis, the researchers check their models carefully against their notes and make a concerted attempt to discover negative evidence that might suggest that the model is incorrect.

Grounded theory:

Systematic theory developed inductively, based on observations that are summarized into conceptual categories, reevaluated in the research setting, and gradually refined and linked to other conceptual categories.

Heidi Levitt, Rebecca Todd Swanger, and Jenny Butler (2008: 435) used a systematic grounded method of analysis to understand the perspective of male perpetrators of violence on female victims. Research participants were recruited from programs the courts used in Memphis to assess and treat perpetrators who admitted to having physically abused a female intimate partner. All program participants were of low socioeconomic status, but in other respects, Levitt and her colleagues (2008: 436) sought to recruit a diverse sample.

The researchers (Levitt et al. 2008: 437–438) began the analysis of their interview transcripts by dividing them into "meaning units"—"segments of texts that each contain one main idea"—and labeling these units with terms like those used by participants. The researchers then compared these labels and combined them into larger descriptive categories. This process continued until they had combined all the meaning units into

The Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) is used on many college campuses to assess the severity of sexual victimization, but researchers have found that it does not differentiate well between situations of unwanted sexual contact and attempted rape. Jenny Rinehart and Elizabeth Yeater (2011: 927) at the University of New Mexico designed a project to develop "a deeper qualitative understanding of the details of the event, as well as the context surrounding it."

As part of a larger study of dating experiences at a West Coast university, Rinehart and Yeater analyzed written narratives provided by 78 women who had indicated some experience with sexual victimization on the SES. The authors and an undergraduate research assistant read each of the narratives and identified eight different themes and contexts, such as "relationship with the perpetrator." Next, they developed specific codes to make distinctions within each of the themes and contexts, such as "friend," "boss," or "stranger" within the "relationship" theme.

Here is an incident in one narrative that Rinehart and Yeater (2011: 934) coded as involving unwanted sexual contact with a friend:

I went out on a date with a guy (he was 24) and we had a good time. He invited me into his apartment after to "hang out" for a little while longer. He tried pressuring me into kissing him at first, even though I didn't want to. Then he wrestled me (playfully to him, but annoyingly and unwanted to me). I repeatedly asked him to get off of me, and eventually he did. I kissed him once.

Their analysis of these narratives made it clear that incidents that received the same SES severity rating often differed considerably when the particulars were examined.

Source: Adapted from Rinehart, Jenny K., and Elizabeth A. Yeater. 2011. A qualitative analysis of sexual victimization narratives. *Violence Against Women* 17(7): 925–943.

In part, male NPOs construct an exaggerated masculinity so that they are not seen as feminine as they carry out the social-work functions of policing. Related to this is the almost defiant expression of heterosexuality, so that the men's sexual orientation can never truly be doubted even if their gender roles are contested. Male patrol officers' language—such as their use of terms like "pansy police" to connote neighborhood police officers—served to affirm their own heterosexuality. In addition, the male officers, but not the women, deliberately wove their heterosexual status into conversations, explicitly mentioning their female domestic partner or spouse and their children. This finding is consistent with research conducted in the occupational field. The studies reveal that men in female-dominated occupations, such as teachers, librarians, and pediatricians, over-reference their heterosexual status to ensure that others will not think they are gay. (p. 307)

Reflexivity

Confidence in the conclusions from a field research study is also strengthened by an honest and informative account about how the researcher interacted with subjects in the field, what problems she encountered, and how these problems were or were not resolved. Such a "natural history" of the development of the evidence enables others to evaluate the findings. Such an account is important primarily because of the evolving and variable nature of field research: To an important extent, the researcher "makes up" the method in the context of a particular investigation rather than applying standard procedures that are specified before the investigation begins.

Barrie Thorne (1993) provides a good example of this final element of the analysis:

seven different clusters. [Exhibit 10.5](#) gives an example of two of their clusters and the four categories of meaning units combined within each (Levitt et al. 2008: 439).

Here is how Levitt and her colleagues (2008) discuss the comments that were classified in Cluster 2, Category 3:

Accordingly, when conflicts accumulated that could not be easily resolved, many of the men (5 of 12) thought that ending the relationship was the only way to stop violence from recurring.

“I don’t deal with anybody so I don’t have any conflicts. . . . It makes me feel bad because I be lonely sometime, but at the same time, it’s the best thing going for me right now. I’m trying to rebuild me. I’m trying to put me on a foundation to where I can be a total leader. Like I teach my sons, ‘Be leaders instead of followers.’”

Exhibit 10.5 Clustering of Meaning Units in a Grounded Theory Project

Clusters (endorsement)	Categories (endorsement)
1. The arrest incident is a hurdle or a test from god that I alone have to deal with, although the responsibility for the abuse was not all my own. (10)	1. If alcohol or drugs had not been in the picture, we wouldn't have come to blows: Substance use is thought to increase the rate of IPV (2) 2. I don't want to get involved in conflict because I don't want to deal with its consequences (9) 3. Joint responsibility in conflict depends on who did more fighting (8) 4. How women cause IPV: Being treated as a child through nagging and being disrespected (5)
2. Passive avoidance and withdrawal from conflict is the best way to prevent aggression and to please god. (10)	1. DV thought to be "cured" by passively attending classes and learning anger management (6) 2. Religious interventions have been vague or guilt producing; we need explicit advice and aren't getting it (9) 3. Intimate partner violence can be stopped by cutting off relationships, but this can be a painful experience (5) 4. Should resolve conflict to create harmony and avoid depression—but conflict may increase as a result (10)

Source: Levitt et al. 2008:439 Levitt, H. M., Todd-Swanger, R., & Butler, J. B. (2008). Male Perpetrators' Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence, Religion, and Masculinity. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 58, 435–448.

Although this interviewee’s choice to isolate himself was a strategy to avoid relational dependency and conflict, it left him without interpersonal support and it could be difficult for him to model healthy relationships for his children. (p. 440)

With procedures such as these, the grounded theory approach develops general concepts from careful review of text or other qualitative materials and can then suggest plausible relationships between these concepts.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative “displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes” (Richardson 1995: 200). **Narrative analysis** focuses on “the story itself” and seeks to preserve the integrity of personal biographies or a series of events that cannot adequately be understood in terms of their discrete elements (Riessman 2002: 218). The coding for a narrative analysis is typically of the narratives as a whole rather than of the different elements within them. The coding strategy revolves around reading the stories and classifying them into general patterns.

Narrative analysis:

A form of qualitative analysis in which the analyst focuses on how respondents impose order on the flow of experience in their lives and so make sense of events and actions in which they have participated.

For example, Morrill and his colleagues (2000) read through 254 conflict narratives written by ninth graders (mentioned at the beginning of this chapter) and found four types of stories:

1. Action tales, in which the author represents himself or herself and others as acting within the parameters of taken-for-granted assumptions about what is expected for particular roles among peers
2. Expressive tales, in which the author focuses on strong, negative emotional responses to someone who has wronged him or her
3. Moral tales, in which the author recounts explicit norms that shaped his or her behavior in the story and influenced the behavior of others
4. Rational tales, in which the author represents himself or herself as a rational decision maker navigating through the events of the story (p. 534)

Morrill et al. (2000: 534–535) also classified the stories along four stylistic dimensions: (1) plot structure (such as whether the story unfolds sequentially), (2) dramatic tension (how the central conflict is represented), (3) dramatic resolution (how the central conflict is resolved), and (4) predominant outcomes (how the story ends). Coding reliability was checked through a discussion by the two primary coders, who found that their classifications agreed for a large percentage of the stories.

The excerpt that begins this chapter exemplifies what Morrill et al. (2000: 536) termed an “action tale.” Such tales

unfold in matter-of-fact tones kindled by dramatic tensions that begin with a disruption of the quotidian order of everyday routines. A shove, a bump, a look . . . triggers a response. . . . Authors of action tales typically organize their plots as linear streams of events as they move briskly through the story’s scenes. . . . This story’s dramatic tension finally resolves through physical fighting, but . . . only after an attempted conciliation. (p. 356)

You can contrast that “action tale” with the following narrative, which Morrill et al. (2000: 545–546) classify as a “moral tale,” in which the student authors “explicitly tell about their moral reasoning, often referring to how normative commitments shape their decision making”:

I . . . got into a fight because I wasn’t allowed into the basketball game. I was being harassed by the captains that wouldn’t pick me and also many of the players. The same type of things had

happened almost every day where they called me bad words so I decided to teach the ring leader a lesson. I've never been in a fight before but I realized that sometimes you have to make a stand against the people that constantly hurt you, especially emotionally. I hit him in the face a couple of times and I got respect I finally deserved. (pp. 545–546)

Morrill et al. (2000: 553) summarize their classification of the youth narratives in a simple table that highlights the frequency of each type of narrative and the characteristics associated with each of them (Exhibit 10.6). How does such an analysis contribute to our understanding of youth violence? Morrill et al. first emphasize that their narratives “suggest that consciousness of conflict among youths—like that among adults—is not a singular entity but comprises a rich and diverse range of perspectives” (p. 551).

Exhibit 10.6 Summary Comparison of Youth Narratives*

Representation of	Action Tales (N = 144)	Moral Tales (N = 51)	Expressive Tales (N = 35)	Rational Tales (N = 24)
Bases of everyday conflict	Disruption of everyday routines & expectations	Normative violation	Emotional provocation	Goal obstruction
Decision making	Intuitive	Principled stand	Sensual	Calculative choice
Conflict handling	Confrontational	Ritualistic	Cathartic	Deliberative
Physical violence†	In 44% (N = 67)	In 27% (N = 16)	In 49% (N = 20)	In 29% (N = 7)
Adults in youth conflict control	Invisible or in background	Sources of rules	Agents of repression	Institutions of social control

* TOTAL N = 254.

† Percentages based on the number of stories in each category.

Source: Morrill et al. “Telling Tales in Schools: Youth Culture and Conflict Narratives.” *Law and Society Review*, 34: 521–565. Copyright © 2000. Reprinted with permission of Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Theorizing inductively, Morrill et al. (2000: 553–554) then attempt to explain why action tales were much more common than were the more adult-oriented normative, rational, or emotionally expressive tales. They say that one possibility is to be found in Carol Gilligan’s (1982) theory of moral development, which suggests that younger students are likely to limit themselves to the simpler action tales that “concentrate on taken-for-granted assumptions of their peer and wider cultures, rather than on more self-consciously reflective interpretation and evaluation” (pp. 553–554). More generally, Morrill et al. argue, “We can begin to think of the building blocks of cultures as different narrative styles in which various aspects of reality are accentuated, constituted, or challenged, just as others are deemphasized or silenced” (p. 556).

In this way, Morrill et al.’s narrative analysis allowed an understanding of youth conflict to emerge from the youths’ own stories while informing our understanding of broader social theories and processes.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation analysis is a specific qualitative method for analyzing ordinary conversation. Unlike narrative analysis, conversation analysis focuses on the sequence and details of conversational interaction rather than on

the “stories” that people are telling. Like ethnomethodology, from which it developed, conversation analysis focuses on how reality is constructed rather than on what it “is.”

Three premises guide conversation analysis (Gubrium and Holstein 2000):

1. Interaction is sequentially organized, and talk can be analyzed in terms of the process of social interaction rather than in terms of motives or social status.
2. Talk, as a process of social interaction, is contextually oriented—it both is shaped by interaction and creates the social context of that interaction.
3. These processes are involved in all social interaction, so no interactive details are irrelevant to understanding it. (p. 492)

Consider these premises as you read the following dialogue between British researcher Ann Phoenix (2003) and a boy she called “Thomas” in her study of notions of masculinity, bullying, and academic performance among 11- to 14-year-old boys in 12 London schools:

Thomas: It’s your attitude, but some people are bullied for no reason whatsoever just because other people are jealous of them. . . .

Q: How do they get bullied?

Thomas: There’s a boy in our year called James, and he’s really clever and he’s basically got no friends, and that’s really sad because . . . he gets top marks in every test and everyone hates him. I mean, I like him. (p. 235)

Phoenix (2003) notes that here,

Thomas dealt with the dilemma that arose from attempting to present himself as both a boy and sympathetic to school achievement. He . . . distanced himself from . . . being one of those who bullies a boy just because they are jealous of his academic attainments . . . constructed for himself the position of being kind and morally responsible. (p. 235)

Note that Thomas was a boy talking to a woman. Do you imagine that his talk would have been quite different if his conversation had been with other boys?

An example of the very detailed data recorded in a formal conversation analysis appears in [Exhibit 10.7](#). It is from David R. Gibson’s (2005: 1566) study of the effects of superior–subordinate and friendship interaction on the transitions that occur during conversation—in this case, in meetings of managers. Every type of “participation-shift” (P-shift) is recorded and distinguished from every other type. Some shifts involve “turn claiming,” in which one person (X) begins to talk after the first person (A) has addressed the group as a whole (0), without being prompted by the first speaker. Some shifts involve “turn receiving,” in which the first person (A) addresses the second (B), who then responds. In “turn usurping,” by contrast, the second person (X) speaks after the first person (A) has addressed a comment to a third person (B), who is thus prevented from responding. Examining this type of data can help us to see how authority is maintained or challenged in social groups.

Exhibit 10.7 Inventory of P-Shifts With Examples