

GLOBAL
EDITION



Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences

NINTH EDITION

Howard Lune • Bruce L. Berg



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Preface

Social research provides necessary support for innumerable professions, bolsters and directs policy decisions, fact-checks both wild and mundane claims about the world, and helps us understand ourselves and others. But even beyond these valuable endeavors, social research has a simple mission “to help us know what’s going on.” In this era of what is sometimes called globalization, everyone’s lives are impacted by vast numbers of things happening all over the planet, in all segments of industry, society, politics, economics, culture, and religion. Even the well-informed have little idea about most of it. We cannot observe and understand everything we need on our own. Research compresses the vast variability of life into more or less consistent and predictable bits of reality. It gives us a leg to stand on.

New to the Edition

The new edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* continues the mission of the original—to teach students where our data comes from, how to manage it, how to make sense of it, what it can mean, and what it can do. In this edition, I have also added an emphasis on the other side of that coin. Each chapter briefly highlights the limitations on the various methods of data collection and analysis. There are things that research cannot do. Well-planned studies with reliable data and valid analyses can teach us a great deal, but they are not magic. As students of research, we must be critical consumers as well as producers. We have to know where to set the limits on our own ambitions and how to critically evaluate the claims that others make based on their understandings of the measurable world.

Research methods continue to grow and develop in exciting new ways, through experience, interdisciplinary conversation, new technologies, and in response to new needs. It has been centuries since maps were routinely produced with large areas of unknown topology. The world is no longer a mystery of undiscovered places and people. Now we are living with the opposite challenge: There is too much data. Everything we do seems to occur in public, in measurable ways. We are data. With increasing use of surveillance technologies, the very concept of anonymity is losing meaning. And, of course, with our mini-oracles in our pockets ready to search the world’s databases in less than one second to immediately retrieve even the most obscure bits of cultural trivia, it seems as though everything is knowable. It isn’t. Factoids of information, traces of personal histories, photographs, song lyrics, and train schedules, as well as body counts and temperature readings are merely data points. None of this

is useful information until it is organized, explored, and interpreted. Research methods grow to manage larger pools of more diverse data. Yet the basic principles and underlying practices remain the same. While this text covers both new and old tricks and techniques, my primary purpose is to emphasize the logic of research planning and the elusive task of finding meaning. The organization of chapters and topics remains unchanged since the last edition. Our job remains the same.

This edition of the book builds on the foundation of the previous editions while offering a number of improvements. I have corrected errors wherever I could find them and sought to clarify the most confusing discussions. I have added new and more challenging exercises and questions for discussion. The present edition gives more attention to visual and spatial analysis and to qualitative analysis software, but only in relation to the familiar methodologies where those tools apply. In addition to the challenge of presenting contemporary technologies before they change again, I have updated many of the examples used throughout the book to provide more contemporary data, except in the cases of certain classic studies or exemplary discussions that, to me, are irreplaceable. I have also reorganized sections for students in order to provide more clarity and to improve readability.

This ninth edition contains expanded discussions in key areas, such as research design, research ethics, and writing. I have given more attention to the context for the different techniques, with explicit attention to when they work best or least. And, to accommodate this new material, I have judiciously removed portions of the text throughout. Overall, I have tried to serve the two goals that have always driven this text from its first edition: to be as useful and challenging as possible without being dull.

This edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* may be read straight through, at approximately one chapter per week, for 12–15 weeks. Or, one can read selectively and in any order. Each chapter is intended to be sufficiently self-contained to allow students to start anywhere and to proceed at your own pace. The coverage of materials is intended to be thorough enough to use as a stand-alone text, while sections are divided in a manner to allow instructors to isolate specific units in conjunction with other texts or readers. Most importantly, the advice and exercises offered here are intended to support students’ efforts to actually get out of the classroom and try some of this out. There is no better learning method than to throw yourself into it, make mistakes, and figure out what went wrong. Success is useful too, but failure can be the best teacher.

Available Instructor Resources

The following instructor resources can be accessed by visiting <http://www.pearsonglobaleditions.com/lune>.

- **Instructor Manual**
Detailed instructor's manual with learning objectives, chapter outlines, discussion questions, activities, and assignments.
- **PowerPoint Presentation**
Provides a core template of the content covered throughout the text; can easily be added to customize for your classroom.
- **Test Bank**
Exhaustive test banks with MCQs, fill in the blanks, and essay-type questions.

Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1.1** Differentiate between qualitative and quantitative methods in research.
- 1.2** Describe how the triangulation methodology is used in research.
- 1.3** Analyze the general purpose of qualitative data.
- 1.4** Examine symbolic interactionism as a school of thought of the social sciences.
- 1.5** Recognize the significance of the right tools for effective qualitative research.
- 1.6** Report how the book helps students of the social sciences.

How do we know things?

Let's consider a few propositions. First, whatever you think you know about the world is incomplete and likely to be at least partially wrong. Second, experience is a great teacher, but your experiences probably don't reflect other people's experience of the world all that well. And besides, we are all rather selective about what things we remember and what lessons we learn from them. So even the things we know from our own lives are somewhat suspect, let alone things we've learned from others. It turns out that this is not a bad thing, as long as we deal with it realistically. But it does not give us a reliable or detailed understanding of our society or much beyond it.

Cynics can deny the things they don't like to believe by asking, "How do you know? Were you there?" This approach gives the false impression that you can only know something by direct experience. How do people born after 1969 know that the moon landing wasn't just a TV show? How do people who watched it on TV at the time know that it wasn't a giant fake produced in Area 51? Why should I believe in Denmark? I've never been there. And if you want to be really difficult with people, you can always remind them that Plato said that we could be lying in a cave somewhere cut off from real sensory input, attached to some kind of matrix-like virtual reality generator. Nonetheless, barring the possibility that the whole apparent world only exists within a conspiracy designed to mess with your head, we can proceed with the

assumption that the world is real, observable, and measurable. The "how do you know" question comes down to three parts: What do we observe? How do we measure things? And how is reliable knowledge distinguished from things we are less sure of?

In this book, we're only going to address these questions for matters of social scientific research. I will leave Denmark to some other writer.

We'll start by distinguishing between the social world and the rest. From where I sit when I'm writing, I can see mountains in the distance, or I would if I went outside. These are observable and real artifacts of the physical world, and therefore not particularly sociological. But all the things around them—from the roads that I drive on over the mountain to get to town, to the radio stations that fade in and out depending on which side I'm on or how high up, or the differences between where there are street lights and where darkness, or the politics and economics of maintaining the reservoir here that provides drinking water elsewhere, or the availability of WiFi in some coffee shops where I write but not in others where I don't—are all artifacts of the social world. And the social world is a lot more complex and changing than the mountains.

Given the complexity and changeability of the social world, we need to introduce some useful assumptions that make observing and measuring it different from observation in the "natural" sciences. First, we're not going to say much about facts and knowledge in the strict sense.

We can make valid observations, measure real data, and draw reliable and meaningful conclusions. But to call this knowledge “facts” might imply to some that they are unchanging truths. Everything we observe and measure is only true up to a point. So we talk about patterns, tendencies, likelihoods, and generalities, but not facts.

Second, though we are born into an existing configuration of social, political, cultural, historical, and economic circumstances, the social world is not simply out there waiting to be found and understood. It is socially constructed, continuously made and remade by human activity. A single building, for example, can be understood as an historical landmark, a tourist attraction, or an eyesore, depending on whom you ask or when you ask that person. The building does not have to change for our understanding of it to change. There are fairly enduring social structures, ideas and practices that are deeply institutionalized in our societies, and familiar tendencies among people. Still, all of those things are constantly open to challenge, reconsideration, inertia, exaggeration, and other forms of change. Reality appears consistent, in part, because of how we choose to define it. So the observation of the social world is necessarily an observation of choices and acts made by people about the world.

And third, as W. I. Thomas observed long ago, most of the time we don’t need to worry about all that. If we treat the social world as though it’s just plain reality, it mostly works. It’s fairly stable and consistent because we believe in it. But it helps if our beliefs bear some resemblance to empirical (measurable) reality. And even if our partial knowledge and impressionistic sense of things is enough to get us through the day, much of it is still wrong.

In the social sciences, we tend to favor quantitative methods of data collection and analysis when we are seeking to measure the relatively stable patterns and practices that define our social structures; we adopt more qualitative methods when we need a deeper understanding of the exceptions and special cases, or when we want to understand the meanings and preferences that underlie those larger patterns. Quantitative work leans toward “what” questions, while qualitative tends toward “why” and “how.” Like most patterns of behavior, however, this distinction can be misleading until we really unpack how it works.

1.1: Qualitative Methods, Qualitative Data

1.1 Differentiate between qualitative and quantitative methods in research

In his attempt to differentiate between quantitative and qualitative approaches, Dabbs (1982, p. 32) indicated that the notion of *quality* is essential to the nature of things.

Quality refers to the what, how, when, where, and why of a thing—its essence and ambience. Qualitative research, thus, refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things. In contrast, quantitative research refers to counts and measures of things, the extents and distributions of our subject matter: how large a thing is, how many of them there are, or how likely we are to encounter one. This distinction is illustrated in Jackson’s (1968) description of classroom odors in an elementary school, data which defines a site in terms that we would not want to quantify. There are odors in our lives that recall specific places and times, just as there are songs or colors that can do the same. These memories evoke feelings based on their qualities, and not their quantities. Qualitative research strategies provide perspectives that can prompt recall of these common or half-forgotten sights, sounds, and smells.

The meanings that we give to events and things come from their qualities. To understand our lives, we need qualitative research. But can we really measure the unquantifiable essences of the phenomena that imbue our lives? Can we ever, in a word, *know*? The answer is *yes*, though it is a qualified *yes*. We can study and measure qualities as collections of meanings, as a spectrum of states of being, but not as precise and solid objects. Qualities are like smoke; they are real and we can see them, but they won’t stand still for us or form straight lines for our rulers to capture. Clearly, qualitative research requires some specialized tools and techniques.

Qualitative and quantitative methods give us different, complementary pictures of the things we observe. Unfortunately, because qualitative research tends to assess the quality of things using words, images, and descriptions and most of quantitative research relies chiefly on computers, many people erroneously regard quantitative strategies as more scientific than those employed in qualitative research. The error of thinking underlying this particular critique is that of confusing the study of imprecise subject matter with the imprecise study of subjects. For this reason alone, qualitative researchers need to be more precise, more careful in their definitions and procedures, and clearer in their writing than most other scientists. From my perspective, this means conducting and describing research that can stand the test of subsequent researchers examining the same phenomenon through similar or different methods. Qualitative research is a long hard road, with elusive data on one side and stringent requirements for analysis on the other. Admittedly, this means that students have a lot to learn and not a lot of room for errors.

What are these qualities that we measure? Why don’t we quantify them? As for that second question, sometimes we do, and sometimes we don’t. All qualities can be quantified up to a point, just as all quantitative data have

qualitative aspects. To better understand that, let's consider some of the qualities that we are good at measuring.

One popular and important area of research concerns social norms—the normatively expected and informally enforced patterns of behavior that are widely shared within any given society. Norms are vital to daily life in a given society, as well as highly revealing about that society. But unlike rules, laws, and procedures, norms are almost never written down or named. This makes it a bit more difficult to study them. Nonetheless, they are visible to us as researchers for exactly the same reasons that they are visible to us as members of a culture. We find evidence of them everywhere.

Jokes require and reveal norms. Much of the work of humor comes from surprising the listener by violating their expectations. Jokes reveal both the normatively expected and the normatively startling. Racist, sexist, and nationalistic jokes, for example, demonstrate the nature of conventionally held negative ideas that one group of people hold toward another. In the United States in the 1960s, for example, it was fairly conventional for newspapers to print cartoons or jokes whose humor depended on the stereotype that women were bad drivers. But there were probably no jokes at all about women as bad sign painters. Sign painting did not invoke or involve deeply held social norms. The driving jokes, however, reflected the normative assumption that most families had one car, that the car belonged specifically to the man of the house, and that his masculine prerogatives would have been threatened by “allowing” his wife to drive. At the same time, women did drive and on average had better road safety records than men. So there was unarticulated social pressure to continuously emphasize that driving was a naturally male thing to do, hence the jokes, and men's appreciation of them. Over time, as more middle-class families with two adults became middle-class families with two jobs and two cars, most people got used to the idea that American masculinity was unharmed by sharing the road, and these jokes became less popular. (But they still show up once in a while.) We use qualitative methods to interpret the jokes and their underlying assumptions; we use quantitative measures to show that they have fallen out of favor. The rise and fall of a style of joke reveals subtle shifts in social norms over a period of a few decades.

Absences also reveal norms. Reviewing the content of American newspapers, for example, demonstrates that crime, politics, and entertainment are very important elements of what is considered newsworthy. Yet, analyses of the crime coverage show a preponderance of attention to violent crime and “street” crime. White-collar crime is rarely mentioned at all, or only appears under the heading of “business news.” It seems that the normative perception of crime does not include the kinds of economic crimes committed by people with money, unless those

people are politicians or celebrities. Normatively, crime is associated with violence and indirectly with poverty. Similarly, sports coverage routinely incorporates athletic accomplishments, medical issues that threaten one's ability to play, and sports contracts. But relatively little of it mentions endorsements, even though many athletes literally wear their endorsements on their sleeves. It seems that only some parts of the business of sports are widely perceived as related to sports. Other aspects are placed in different categories. We (as a society) come to recognize a certain cluster of things as belonging to the same category, and actively “split” other related things off into different categories, thereby creating “islands of meaning” out of the haphazard whirlwind of things in our lives (Zerubavel, 1996). We include 18-year-olds in our mental category for “adults,” but not 17-year-olds. These meanings might be codified into dictionary definitions that emphasize what is included. But it takes more work to recognize those things that have been excluded.

According to a study by Harold Garfinkel, one of the most immediate and effective ways to demonstrate the existence of norms is to violate them and observe the results. A pattern of absences might or might not indicate that the exclusion of some class of events or people is considered normal. But what happens when the usually excluded category is included?

Consider American movies. Not only are most of the main characters straight, white, and presumably Christian men, but most of the random secondary characters seem to be as well. Women are introduced where the plot requires a woman, as is true with nonwhites, gay characters, and others who are defined by their differences from the norm. But is this evidence of norms at work, or just preferences and prejudices within a specific industry? One clue comes from those occasions when a film violates this expectation by broadening the field of actors. When a character is cast with a black actor (or defined as gay), is there pushback from viewers and critics? Is the casting decision derided as “stunt” casting, even if the story does not require that the character be white (or straight)? If no ethnic or demographic characteristics are required for the part, the popular assumption is that the person will be whatever is most normative. Thus, the expectations reveal the norms, and the objections to their violation, when they occur, reveal the expectations.

Similar processes are at work in colleges, where professors who include a diversity of materials are criticized by some students for this. To add some sense of quantity to this, professors who assign a majority of readings from white or male authors, with a small number of works by women or nonwhites, frequently report some number (a minority) of student evaluations accusing them of anti-male or antiwhite bias, as though the mere presence of any nonwhite expert or woman scholar is inherently suspect.

Now it is important to note that usually the majority of students don't complain, the professors are not punished, and the classes continue to run. No free speech rights are on the line. The point is not that the faculty is prevented from teaching the work of black authors or anyone else. The point is that some members of the dominant culture think that such a thing as diversity is odd. The fact that they would make an issue of it demonstrates the presence of the social norms; their complaints reveal what they expected to find.

In each of these cases, I am describing how the existence of specific social norms may be demonstrated through the qualitative analysis of what we call social artifacts—things produced or performed by people in the normal course of their lives. Two very important points need to be emphasized about these examples. First, I am not describing a single event as evidence of social values, but rather a regular and familiar pattern of events. Individual cases may not mean very much. We tend to look instead at multitudes of cases. And second, these cases reveal the existence of specific norms, and not the number of people who adhere to them, the strength of people's belief in them, or the likelihood of encountering them. That is, we can't quantify this data based on the kinds of studies described here. That sort of question requires different sorts of studies.

1.2: Use of Triangulation in Research Methodology

1.2 Describe how the triangulation methodology is used in research

Most researchers have at least one methodological technique they feel most comfortable using, which often becomes their favorite or only approach to research. Furthermore, many researchers perceive their research method as an atheoretical tool, distinct from the conceptual frameworks that shape their research questions (Denzin, 1978). Because of this, they fail to recognize that methods impose certain perspectives on reality. For example, when researchers canvass a neighborhood and arrange interviews with residents to discuss some social problem, a theoretical assumption has already been made—specifically, that reality is fairly constant and stable and that people can reliably observe and describe it. Similarly, when they make direct observations of events, researchers assume these events are deeply affected by the actions of all participants, including themselves. (I'm not saying that this is not a fair assumption, only that it is a more or less hidden assumption that precedes the application of "theory.") Content analysis of important speeches generally relies on the assumption that the people who give these speeches

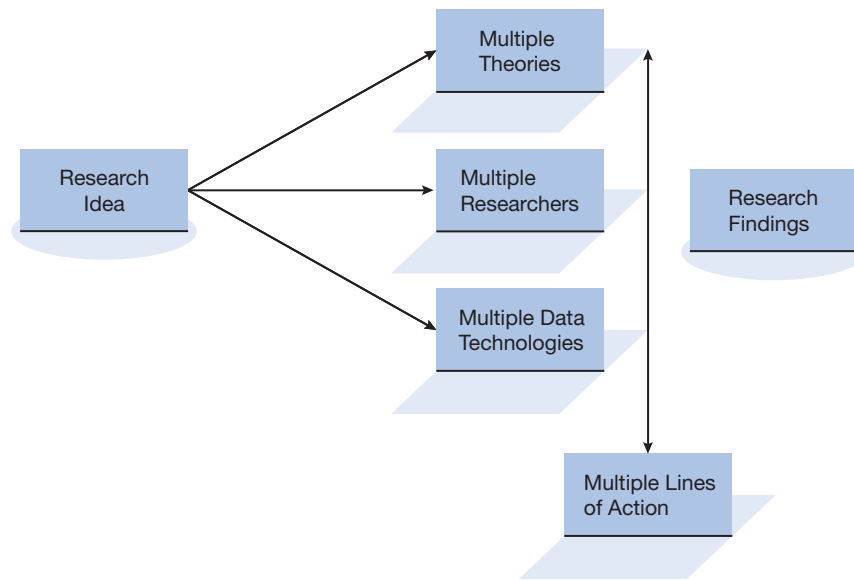
write, or at least endorse, their own words, and that they are important. Analysis of news articles in the study of key social events relies on the assumption that key events are represented with descriptive accuracy in the news. Each method, thus, reveals slightly different facets of the same symbolic reality. Every method is a different line of sight directed toward the same point, observing particular aspects of the social and symbolic reality. By combining several lines of sight, researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements. The use of multiple lines of sight is frequently called *triangulation*.

"Triangulation" is a term originally more common in surveying activities, map making, navigation, and military practices. In each case, three known points or objects are used to draw sighting lines toward an unknown point or object. Usually, these three sighting lines intersect, forming a small triangle called the *triangle of error*. The best estimate of the true location of the new point or object is the center of the triangle, assuming that the three lines are about equal in error. Although sightings could be done with two sighting lines intersecting at one point, the third line permits a more accurate estimate of the unknown point or object (Berg & Berg, 1993).

Triangulation was first used in the social sciences as a metaphor describing a form of *multiple operationalism* or *convergent validation* (Campbell, 1956; Campbell & Fiske, 1959). In those cases, triangulation was used largely to describe multiple data-collection technologies designed to measure a single concept or construct (data triangulation). However, Denzin (1978, p. 292) introduced an additional metaphor, *lines of action*, which characterizes the use of multiple data-collection technologies, multiple theories, multiple researchers, multiple methodologies, or combinations of these four categories of research activities (see Figure 1.1).

For many researchers, triangulation is restricted to the use of multiple data-gathering techniques (usually three) to investigate the same phenomenon. This is interpreted as a means of mutual confirmation of measures and validation of findings (Casey & Murphy, 2009; Leedy, 2001; Leedy & Ormrod, 2004). Fielding and Fielding (1986, p. 31) specifically addressed this aspect of triangulation. They suggested that the important feature of triangulation is not the simple combination of different kinds of data but the attempt to relate them so as to counteract the threats to validity identified in each.

Denzin insists that the multiple-methods approach is the generic form of this approach. But triangulation actually represents varieties of data, investigators, theories, and methods. Denzin (1978, p. 295) outlined these four categories into more detailed subgroupings of time and place, social setting, theoretical perspective, and mixed

Figure 1.1 Multiple Lines of Action in Triangulation

methods. It is difficult for a single text or course to prepare students to accomplish all that. Triangulation, as a model for research, requires researchers to be fluent in multiple methods. Yet, it is useful to study qualitative and quantitative techniques somewhat independently, if only to give each its due credit.

Some authors of general-purpose research texts associate qualitative research with the single technique of participant observation. Other writers extend their understanding of qualitative research to include interviewing as well. However, qualitative research also includes such methods as observation of experimental natural settings, photographic techniques (including videotaping), historical analysis (historiography), document and textual analysis, sociometry, sociodrama, and similar ethnomethodological experimentation, ethnographic research, and a number of unobtrusive techniques. In the interests of triangulation, primarily qualitative studies need not exclude quantitative data-gathering techniques as well, though we won't be discussing them here.

This book stresses several discrete yet intertwined strategies and techniques involved in each of the major research schemes. In fact, the decision to discuss field research strategies under the broad umbrella of *ethnography* ensures the inclusion of a wide combination of elements, such as direct observation, various types of interviewing (informal, formal, semiformal), listening, document analysis (e.g., letters or newspaper clippings), and ethnomethodological experimentation. Novice researchers are thus instructed in the use of research strategies composed of multiple methods in a single investigation. I also follow Denzin's (2010) approach that triangulation includes multiple theoretical perspectives and multiple analysis

techniques in addition to multiple data-collection procedures. The use of multiple research design strategies and theories increases the depth of understanding an investigation can yield (see also Dittmann, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 2002).

1.3: Qualitative Strategies: Defining an Orientation

1.3 Analyze the general purpose of qualitative data

We do not conduct research only to amass data. The purpose of research is to discover answers to questions through the application of systematic procedures. Qualitative research properly seeks answers by examining various social settings and the groups or individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles, and so forth.

Research on human beings affects how these persons will be viewed (Bogdan & Taylor, 1998). When humans are studied in a symbolically reduced, statistically aggregated fashion, there is a danger that conclusions—although arithmetically precise—may misrepresent the people or circumstances studied (Mills, 1959). Qualitative procedures seek patterns among cases, but do not reduce these cases to their averages. They provide a means of accessing unquantifiable knowledge about the actual people researchers observe and talk to or about people represented by their personal traces (such as letters, photographs, newspaper

accounts, and diaries). As a result, qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives. Researchers using qualitative techniques examine how people learn about and make sense of themselves and others. Of course, the more depth of knowledge you have of a particular group, the more you capture the uniqueness of that group. An advantage that much quantitative research has over qualitative is that it ignores this unique depth in favor of a more general, widespread pattern of acts or ideas. In other words, qualitative research does not generalize as easily over a large population.

Before we get too much into the nature of the limitations on our data, we need to be clearer about the uses of this data. I said earlier that we deal in patterns, not facts. What does that mean? Let us suppose that we have conducted a series of interviews with Chicago Cubs fans and found that a large number of them appear to have adopted a sense of fatalism about their team's prospects. That is an interesting finding in itself, but to claim that a "large number" of them have this quality does not mean that they all share this quality, or that this quality is caused by rooting for the Cubs, or that they approach everything in their lives this way. It does mean that there is a pattern among the responses from the fans that stands out as different from what is known about the general population. This pattern can gain some explanatory power when we compare the respondents' feelings about the team with their feelings about other aspects of their lives. It can tell us something about baseball fans if we were to compare this group with Yankees fans or Royals fans. And we can certainly make meaningful comparisons with other groups of people who have waited a very long time for something they wish would happen, but maybe no longer believe in.

Presenting this data can be very tricky. If I say that a great many fans of this team share a certain attitude toward the team, I need to be careful not to overgeneralize and imply that you have to have this attitude to follow the Cubs. Obviously, it would not be hard to find one fan, among that many, who completely contradicts this idea. What's important to know is that this exception, or many exceptions, doesn't matter, because we are not trying to make a big claim about everyone. The patterns we find are real and have significance even though they are not absolute rules that need to apply to all people. The same is true for the other examples discussed already. If a review of popular contemporary movies finds, as suggested above, that the generic assumption for all major characters is that they are white heterosexual men, then this shows that some sort of filtering process is happening in the film industry at some level, whether it's in the writing, the directing, or just the casting. And this finding remains meaningful regardless of how many starring roles Morgan Freeman has. It's

a pattern, not a law. Exceptions neither prove nor disprove the tendency.

It's been my observation that people don't like incomplete information, or generalizations, that can't be applied universally. We should test that idea before making too many assertions, but I believe this to be fair. I think it's one of the reasons that people both oversimplify social reality and think that research oversimplifies. This leads to what I like to call *the life cycle of a sociological study*. It works something like this:

1. A researcher notices an interesting thing and decides to look into it. For example, it might be that pet owners who have daily conversations with their parrots claim that this is great for reducing stress, and we want to know more about this idea.
2. The researcher adopts a set of stress measures (probably quantitative) and a measure of the quality of one's relationship with pets. She designs a study for some number of participants across the spectrum of pet ownership, gets funding and approvals, and begins to collect data.
3. The results indicate that people who have "good" relationships with their pets are less stressed than people who don't. (I'm making this example up; no promises for you pet owners.)
4. The researcher writes a paper in which she discusses all of the major issues around stress and stress relief, including past research with animals, the health risks of high stress, and the problems of social isolation. She concludes that talking with your animal companions, particularly birds, can be part of a healthy lifestyle, qualifying this to remind readers that it could well be that people who are mellow enough to talk to their birds might not have been all that stressed to begin with.
5. The paper's publisher distributes the abstract, which states that conversations with pets are associated with low-stress, heart-healthy lives.
6. Some news or entertainment media source picks this up and broadcasts, "Can Talking to a Bird Save Your Life?!!" In their full story, they speak with "lifestyle" experts, some of whom say it makes sense, and some who say it probably doesn't. None of them discuss any of the methods, qualifications, or limitations actually described in the article, simplifying the whole thing to either "science says that you should talk to your bird" or "this one scientist thinks that raising birds is more important than exercise."
7. Scores of people write comments to the news sites, saying things like "what is wrong with those sociologists who keep claiming to be saving the world with their trivial studies?" or "We all knew that already! What a waste of money." And inevitably, "This is stupid. I know someone who took care of 10 birds and still died."

In simpler terms, we design and conduct careful, qualified research that indicates partial relationships among important social variables and which sets these relationships in a context. Other people, looking for permanent social laws, tear these results out of context and claim too much for them. Then the researcher is blamed for the excesses.

The moral, though, is to do careful work, note its limitations, and try not to be quoted out of context. We counteract misunderstanding and misinformation with clarity and caution.

This explanation of the general purpose of qualitative research in which we are searching for interpretive patterns of meaning derives from a symbolic interactionist perspective. *Symbolic interaction* is an umbrella concept under which a variety of related theoretical orientations may be placed. The theme that unites the diverse elements of symbolic interaction is the focus on subjective understandings and the perceptions of and about people, symbols, and objects.

1.4: From a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

1.4 Examine symbolic interactionism as a school of thought of the social sciences

Symbolic interactionism is one of the several theoretical schools of thought in the social sciences. The substantive basis for symbolic interaction as a theory is frequently attributed to the social behavioral work of Dewey (1930), Cooley (1902), Parks (1915), Mead (1934, 1938), and several other early theorists, but Herbert Blumer is considered the founder of symbolic interactionism. In fact, he coined the term. In articulating his view of what symbolic interaction is, Blumer (1969) first established that human beings account for *meaning* in two basic ways. First, meaning may be seen as intrinsically attached to an object, event, phenomenon, and so on. Second, meaning may be understood as a “psychical accretion” imposed on objects, events, and the like by people. As Blumer (1969, p. 5) explained, “Symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products formed through activities of people interacting.” Objects and events exist. Meaning is attached to them by human thought and action.

Blumer thereby suggests that meanings derive from the social process of people or groups of people *interacting*. Meanings allow people to produce various realities that constitute the sensory world (the so-called real world), but because these realities are related to how people create meanings, reality becomes an interpretation of various definitional options. Consequently, as referenced earlier, “It is not important whether or not the interpretation is

correct—if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Swaine, 1928, p. 572).

For instance, the first day of each semester, students walk into their classroom and see someone who appears to be the professor. This supposed professor begins to lecture, distribute syllabi, discuss course requirements, and conduct various other traditional first-day activities. Few, if any, students ask to see their professor’s credentials. Yet, the students, within certain limits, perform their roles as students so long as this professor continues to perform the role of instructor. Suppose that several weeks into the semester, however, the class is notified that the person they assumed to be a professor is really a local dogcatcher who has no academic credentials. The question then becomes whether the reality of the classroom experience during the previous weeks is void merely because the dogcatcher was incorrectly interpreted as a professor. It would, of course, remain to be seen whether any information conveyed by the dogcatcher was accurate, and certainly, the classroom remained a classroom and students continued to perform their expected roles. From Thomas’s perspective, these youths had defined the reality as a class, and it became one for them. Interestingly, a real version of this scenario confronted the University of Chicago and its students when it was revealed that the celebrated psychology professor Bruno Bettelheim, who had taught there for 30 years until the early 1970s (the same decades during which Chicago sociologists were developing the theory of symbolic interactionism), had faked his academic credentials and was not actually trained as a psychologist. What, then, are we to make of his research findings or his teachings? Have they ceased to qualify as knowledge?

Symbolic interactionists tend to differ slightly among themselves regarding the relative significance of various aspects of an interactionist perspective. Several basic elements, however, tend to bind together even the most diverse symbolic interactionists. First, all interactionists agree that human interactions form the central source of data. Second, there is a general consensus that participants’ perspectives and their ability to take the roles of others (empathy) are key issues in any formulation of a theory of symbolic interaction. Third, interactionists agree with Thomas concerning “definitions of a situation,” that is, the view that how inhabitants of a setting define their situation determines the nature and meaning of their actions as well as the setting itself.

Researchers in different schools have given rise to different schools of thought within the interactionist paradigm. While the idea originated at the University of Chicago under the leadership of Herbert Blumer, Manford Kuhn and researchers at the University of Iowa developed their own approach. Among the more prominent contributions to symbolic interaction from the Iowa School is the

Figure 1.2 The Twenty-Statement Test

Please write 20 answers to the question "Who am I?"
I am...

1. _____	11. _____
2. _____	12. _____
3. _____	13. _____
4. _____	14. _____
5. _____	15. _____
6. _____	16. _____
7. _____	17. _____
8. _____	18. _____
9. _____	19. _____
10. _____	20. _____

Scoring Instructions: Categorize each of the twenty statements in terms of each giving a description of the subject as *external* or *internal*.

External: This phrase locates the individual in society by describing some social role he or she plays or enacts. For example, the names of social roles one holds are all *external*: mother, father, son, daughter, student, salesman, police officer, store clerk, baseball fan, and so on.

Internal: This phrase locates the individual inside his or her self by describing an internal or interior quality or trait one possesses. For example, names of personal intrinsic qualities or characteristics one possesses are all *internal*: shy, ambitious, insecure, happy, sad, ambiguous, curious, depressed, hard working, industrious, and so on.

Place an E for external or an I for internal beside each of the 20 statements; then, total up the number of statements representing each category.

Total number of external descriptors: _____

Total number of internal descriptors: _____

development of a research instrument called the *twenty-statement test* (TST). The TST can be used to identify self-designations that result from social roles an individual plays rather than from his or her personal self-concepts. The TST is a rather simple tool that asks the subject the question, "Who am I?" The subject then fills out 20 blank spaces in answer to this question. The responses are scored as representing either an external or internal self-concept. Figure 1.2 offers an example of the TST.

The twenty-statement test can be used for a rough assessment of an individual's sense of self or identity. The test has the virtues of being straightforward and simple and providing a relatively direct measure of the subject's self-concepts. In contrast to this systematic orientation, the Chicago School's orientation relied more heavily on participant observational research. Thus, the Chicago School was somewhat more anthropological and sought to understand the meanings of individuals and groups without an emphasis on revealing generalizable patterns of human behavior.

The differences between Blumer's and Kuhn's methodological approaches center on their assumptions concerning the operation of symbolic processes. To a

considerable measure, this involves the issue of *causality*. In other words, when one considers deterministically what *causes* certain events, this understanding bears on the methodology used. From Blumer's (1969) indeterministic orientation, social structures are to be understood as emergent phenomenon, and, in effect, as the product of shared interpretations held by people. Consequently, these understandings are the result of internal symbolic processes that allow an individual to group together various behaviors into an organized coherent pattern, such that it offers meaning. These understandings, however, are not the result of system forces, societal needs, or structural mechanisms. Social organization from this point of view is the result of mutual interpretations, evaluations, definitions, and social mappings created by individuals (Herman, 1995). For Blumer and his followers, the symbolic processes of humans cannot be conceived as a mechanism through which social forces operate; rather, they must be viewed as shaping the way structures are created, maintained, and transformed. In this sort of orientation, it is difficult to establish causality. Social structures or organizations do *not* cause human behaviors; instead, these are

merely types of objects in the individual's environment and symbolic thought processes. Research, therefore, must focus on subjects' meanings, expectations, and perceptions first, with actions and decisions following.

In contrast, Kuhn argued for a deterministic model of social organization. From this perspective, social institutions are viewed as representing relatively stable networks of social positions accompanied by associated norms and expectations. Symbolic interactions between individuals, then, are adept at creating and altering situations and structures. Once these structures are created, they are capable of constraining individuals. From this perspective, social structures are understood as fairly stable, especially when the individual's core self is invested in these social structures and networks of positions. If one can learn about the nature of one's core self, of the expectations one has internalized, as well as one's expectations in a given situation, it is possible, according to Kuhn, to *predict* people's definitions of a situation, as well as their behaviors. The social setting constrains much of the meaning systems that the people in the setting use, and this setting can be studied independently of the people in it.

These divergent assumptions about human behavior and issues of causality resulted in followers of the Chicago School and the Iowa School adopting different methodological approaches. That is to say, different theories shaped different research methods. Blumer and his followers borrowed from the phenomenologists and oriented their methodological strategies toward nongeneralizing and idiographic methods. The primary goal of this approach was to make social life intelligible. From this perspective, the act of research must be viewed as a process of symbolic interaction wherein the researcher takes the role of the subjects who are being studied. Blumer and his followers, then, saw research as possessing a twofold agenda: (1) exploration, where the researcher examines and observes specific situations and events, followed by (2) inspection wherein the researcher uses data (systematically collected) to refine concepts, and then to use these in general statements describing human life and behavior.

In contrast to this, Kuhn and his followers maintained a deterministic emphasis, stressed the commonality of methods across all the sciences, and tended to follow the basic principles of logical positivism. From this perspective, the goal of methodology is to specify operational definitions of concepts that can be tested (Herman, 1995; Maines, Sugrue, & Katovich, 1983). Objects, people, situations, and events do not in themselves possess meaning. Meaning is conferred on these elements by and through human interaction. For example, a DVD player in a college classroom may be defined by the professor as a teaching device to be used for showing educational videos. For the student using a DVD player in his or her dormitory to view rented movies, this instrument may be seen as a

source of entertainment and pleasure, while for the inmate held in a maximum security prison who watches home movies sent from his or her family, it may be considered a window to the outside world. The meanings that people attach to their experiences and the objects and events that make up these experiences are not accidental or unconnected. Both the experiences and the events surrounding them are essential to the construction of meanings. One could view the DVD player as a single, unambiguous device with many possible uses. But to do so implies that objects and events have an inherent reality distinct from their meanings. The interactionist perspective assumes that the key to defining an object or event is found in the meaning that users attribute to it.

To understand behavior, one must first understand the definitions and meanings and the processes by which they have been created. Human behavior does not occur on the basis of predetermined lockstep responses to preset events or situations. Rather, human behavior is an ongoing and negotiated interpretation of objects, events, and situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). For researchers to understand the meanings that emerge from these interactions, they must either enter into the defining process or develop a sufficient appreciation for the process so that understandings can become clear. A disk player is just a device and may be deceptively simple to analyze. But what of a somewhat chaotic, somewhat disruptive protest march. Does it have an underlying reality, separate from meaning? Is it a demonstration of solidarity, an attack on social order, an exemplar of democracy in action, or a coordinated criminal event? Can the event be explained without adopting a perspective and system of meaning?

Although social roles, institutional structures, rules, norms, goals, and the like may provide the raw material with which individuals create their definitions, these elements do not by themselves determine what the definitions will be or how individuals will act. In essence, symbolic interactionism emphasizes social interactions (action with symbolic meaning), negotiation of definitions, and emphatic role-taking between humans (Gecas, 1981; Turner, 1978). Measuring these interactions forms the core of the data-collection strategies that we will be studying in this book.

1.5: Why Use Qualitative Methods?

1.5 Recognize the significance of the right tools for effective qualitative research

It has been suggested that to a child with a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. We all have our preferred methods of dealing with challenges. Specialization can be quite useful, but it has its downside as well.

Many researchers believe that the social sciences have depended too much on sterile survey techniques, regardless of whether the technology is appropriate for the problem. For instance, nurses, when taught to do research at all, are strongly urged to use *scientific* strategies of quantification over more sociologically or anthropologically oriented ones that are considered less scientific. Unfortunately, clinical settings in which nurses are likely to conduct their research fail to meet most quantitative requirements for representativeness and sufficiency of sample size to allow statistically meaningful results. The tools at their disposal are not the right ones for the job.

For instance, let us say the average number of beds in a critical care unit varies between 8 and 12. Even when there are multiple units (e.g., in a medical intensive care unit or a cardiac intensive care unit), typically, fewer than 40 cases are available at any given time. With regard to research strategy, such a situation should preclude most quantitative investigations. On the other hand, 40 cases would prove ample for a number of qualitative strategies. In fact, as Chapter 8 describes, a setting such as a hospital would provide researchers with numerous opportunities to implement unobtrusive measures.

We believe that researchers need a complete tool kit with which to craft the best approach to any given problem or topic. Scientific researchers may emphasize a more positivist view or may be primarily interested in individuals and their so-called life-worlds. In the case of life-worlds, researchers focus on naturally emerging languages and the meanings individuals assign to experience. Life-worlds include emotions, motivations, symbols and their meanings, empathy, and other subjective aspects associated with naturally evolving lives of individuals and groups. These elements may also represent their behavioral routines, experiences, and various conditions affecting these usual routines or natural settings. Many of these elements are directly observable and as such may be viewed as objectively measurable data. Nonetheless, certain elements of symbolism, meaning, or understanding usually require consideration of the individual's own perceptions and subjective apprehensions. This is qualitative data.

1.6: A Plan of Presentation

1.6 Report how the book helps students of the social sciences

Colleges require students to study research methods both to learn the major work of our fields of study and to acquire pragmatic skills. Thus, students must confront the myriad problems associated with understanding empirical results, as well as the process of research itself. This book provides

much-needed assistance for all researchers, including the inexperienced, through a discussion of various qualitative research strategies, design development, data organization and presentation, and analysis procedures.

We now offer the ninth edition of this book, once again focusing on innovative ways of collecting and analyzing qualitative data collected in natural settings. I continue to address those data-collection strategies that may be characterized as the building blocks for emerging researchers. As in past editions, this text concentrates on basic procedures. This text avoids the cookbook approach to research; very few instruction lists or absolute statements of what you must do for your research fully represent one technique or other. Instead, my goal is to offer a handle on what these techniques are; why, when, and how we use them; and what we can get out of them. Of course, this also includes cautionary notes about their limitations and a certain amount of attention to when not to use each approach. Throughout, I make a few simple assumptions. First, if you are reading this book, it means you are training to do research and, therefore, probably want to know how to take charge of your own projects and get the good results that will answer your questions. Second, if you want to apply some specific technique or creative combination of techniques, but want more of a checklist to go with it, you know how to find one. I'm not saying that such things aren't useful, only that my priorities lean more toward depth of understanding and away from vocabulary tests and recipes. Finally, I assume that the first draft of anything any of us comes up with will not be sufficient. For that reason, I imagine that you, students, will be reading parts of the chapters for instructions on how to get started, and then returning for ideas about how to fix whatever design or plan you have started on. The organization of most chapters is intended to support such an approach.

This new edition continues the impossible task of trying to keep up with developing technologies, incorporates recent examples of important and innovative qualitative research, and strengthens the presentation of basic techniques. As well, this edition goes further in attempting to integrate all of the material into a cohesive lesson on planning and carrying out your research, with more explanation of research design and more attention to design issues throughout the chapters. I also provide new material on the very important questions of when not to use certain techniques and when and how specific techniques can fail to serve.

This book describes in detail seven primary ways to collect qualitative data: interviewing, focus groups, ethnography, observations, historiography, content analysis, and case studies. In addition, we will examine a framework for undertaking participatory research studies, sometimes called action research. Action research has a substantial

history in educational and nursing research and is moving rapidly into broader scientific endeavors as well. These methods include an examination of the basic theoretical assumptions of each technique and advice on how to start each procedure and how to resolve problems that may arise. Furthermore, I present the technique of content analysis as the model for the analysis of most qualitative data, particularly those that we call “social artifacts.” Also as an essential element or consideration in any research study, this book explores the ethical dimensions of conducting research on humans; it is within the context of this ethical dimension to research that the section on *critical ethnography* has been included. This edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* begins with the assumption that the reader knows little or nothing about the research process. Chapter 2, therefore, offers a basic description of how to design a research project. Most of the rest of the book can be read in almost any order.

Having briefly outlined the basic assumptions and qualitative orientations of symbolic interaction, it is now possible to weave in various methodological strategies. Chapter 2 provides the basic information necessary for understanding the research enterprise. This chapter discusses the research process and proposes a spiraling model to follow when developing a research agenda. Chapter 2 also offers advice about how to organize and conduct a literature review.

Chapter 3 considers a number of ethical concerns that are important for new investigators to understand before actually conducting research. Among the salient issues considered are covert versus overt research concerns, privacy rights, human subject institutional review boards, and informed consent in human subject research.

In addition to providing a general discussion of various forms and styles of traditional interviewing techniques, Chapter 4 uses a kind of symbolic interaction known as *dramaturgy* and suggests an effective research strategy for conducting in-depth interviews.

Chapter 5 also addresses the area of interviewing but moves toward a specialized style, namely, focus groups. This chapter examines the early origins of focus group interviews, their development during the past several decades, and their growing use in the social sciences.

Chapter 6 builds on the foundation constructed in Chapters 1 through 4 and extends the research process

into the natural setting by examining ethnography. Along with interviewing, Chapter 6 discusses watching and listening, field notes, and a number of other field research concerns. This chapter examines ethnography both as a means of collecting data (what some call the *new ethnography*) and as an end in itself (narrative ethnographic accounts). This chapter further explores critical ethnography and the role it may play in the ethical conduct of naturalistic research.

Chapter 7 considers a dynamic mode of research, namely, action research. Action research has a substantial history in educational and nursing research and is moving rapidly into broader scientific endeavors as well.

While Chapters 4, 5, and 6 separately address the concept of interviewer reactivity, Chapter 8 offers several strategies that avoid reactivity almost entirely: It explores the use of unobtrusive measures.

As foreshadowed slightly in Chapter 8, the use of certain unobtrusive data has grown quite specialized. Chapter 9 examines a specialized and systematic use of certain kinds of running records, namely, historiography. In addition to the use of records, Chapter 9 considers oral histories and life histories as variations in historiography.

Chapter 10 examines a technique used to study individuals in their unique settings or situations. This technique is commonly called the *case study method*. This chapter also discusses how case studies may be undertaken on communities and organizations.

Chapter 11 dovetails with each of the preceding chapters on research techniques. Included in this chapter are recommendations for how novice researchers may organize their data and begin to make sense of what may be volumes of notes, transcripts, and trace documents and artifacts. Chapter 11 also briefly discusses the use of computers to assist in this data management scheme.

Chapter 12, the final chapter, offers recommendations for how novice qualitative researchers can disseminate their research findings.

“Trying It Out,” a section at the conclusion of each of the data-collection technique chapters, offers suggestions for practicing each of the seven strategies. Most chapters also contain a “Why It Works” section and a “Why It Fails” section highlighting conditions that are or are not compatible with the technique under discussion.

Chapter 2

Designing Qualitative Research



Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- 2.1** Evaluate the applicability of theory and concepts in qualitative research.
- 2.2** Explain how research progresses from the original idea.
- 2.3** Describe the importance of authentic literature in research.
- 2.4** Give an example of a problem statement with researchable questions.
- 2.5** Describe the process of operationally defining a concept.
- 2.6** Examine how the technique of concept mapping assists the research design process.
- 2.7** Recognize the importance of advance planning before beginning the data-collection process.
- 2.8** Describe the three concurrent flows of action comprising data analysis.
- 2.9** Explain why dissemination of research findings is important.
- 2.10** Analyze why the design logic is important in understanding research.
- 2.11** Recognize why research fails at times.

This chapter considers various ways of thinking about and planning research. If you don't know where you're going, George Harrison observed, any road will take you there. But if you do have a particular destination in mind, then it's pretty important to choose your path deliberately and carefully. In research terms, we have a lot of tools and techniques that are discussed in this book, but you have to decide which you need when, and why, and how to apply it to your research problem.

This chapter will get you started on planning your research journey. It includes discussion of the relationships among ideas, theory, and concepts and of what many people find to be the most difficult facet of research: conceptualization. This chapter further offers a strategy for conducting literature reviews and explains the importance of carefully designing and planning research in advance. Let's begin with some thoughts about ideas, concepts, and theory.

2.1: Theory and Concepts

2.1 Evaluate the applicability of theory and concepts in qualitative research

In the natural sciences, certain patterns of relationships occur with such regularity that they are deemed laws: occurrences of universal certainty. No such laws are found in the social sciences. This does not, however, mean that social life operates in a totally chaotic or completely irrational manner. Rather, social life operates within fairly regular patterns, and when carefully examined, these patterns make considerable sense. Unlike laws, patterns are tendencies, representing typical and expected forms of action around which innumerable individual variations may be found. As well, patterns of expected action often include smaller patterns of reaction against the expected actions. It is as though for every large group of balls that

fall down, a few fall up or to the side. Gravity defines the general pattern, while other actions unrelated to gravity form a smaller pattern within the whole.

One purpose of social scientific research is to find the meaning underlying these various patterns. This is accomplished by creating, examining, testing, and refining theory. What then is theory? Theory is the meaning that we assign to things that we observe in order to make sense of them. Theory can be defined as a general and more or less comprehensive set of statements or propositions that describe different aspects of some phenomenon (Hagan, 2006; Silverman, 2006). In an applied context, theories can be understood as interrelated ideas about various patterns, concepts, processes, relationships, or events. In a formal sense, social scientists usually define theory as a system of logical statements or propositions that explain the relationship between two or more objects, concepts, phenomena, or characteristics of humans—what are sometimes called variables (Babbie, 2007; Denzin, 1978; Polit, Beck, & Hungler, 2003). Theory might also represent attempts to develop coherent narratives about reality or ways to classify and organize events, describe events, or even predict future events (Hagan, 2006). Theories are explanations. The theory of gravity explains why things fall, as well as predicting and explaining orbits and the physical stability of the universe. Theories of inequality contribute to our explanations for all kinds of economic behavior, from consumption to crime to wedding receptions. In time, we may find newer and more informative ways to explain the things we experience as gravity, or the ways in which we respond to inequality. These new approaches may take on different names, but that will not mean that the original theories were wrong, only that explanations can be improved with more data.

Theories have general applicability. I would not, for example, theorize that the shelf above my bathroom sink will collapse if I put more stuff on it. I would theorize that certain construction materials have limited weight capacity, which can be exceeded. I might theorize that when there are more objects to be shelved than there are shelves to hold them, people will frequently choose the short-term convenience of placing too many things on one shelf over the long-term benefit of building or finding new places to put things. These two theoretical models together yield a tangible prediction: I have to do something about all of this junk or my shelf will fall. That last prediction is more of a hypothesis—a testable proposition about specific cases or variables.

In order to construct theories, one needs some smaller components or what Jonathan Turner (1989, p. 5) calls the “basic building blocks of theory,” namely, concepts. Concepts, then, are symbolic or abstract elements representing objects, properties, or features of objects, processes, or phenomenon. Concepts may communicate ideas or introduce particular perspectives, or they may be a means for explaining a broad generalization. When we talk about the social construction

of the world, a large part of what we are referring to is the process of grouping some forms of behavior under one name, others under a different name, and not naming some at all. These groups are named in order to convey some concept. For example, different societies conceptualize “family” differently, and each will have in mind a somewhat different set of relations when they use that word. Similarly, many societies divide the world of animals into such groupings as “pets,” “food,” “work animals,” and “wild.” We treat these divisions as though they are simply elements of the natural world and not reflections of our own social relations with nature. These groupings vary and are almost arbitrary. Yet, when one culture sees an animal as a pet and another sees it as food, members of each culture are likely to feel that their own definitions are simply true and that the others are weird. Conceptual definitions of things reflect how we choose to understand the things that we are defining.

In terms of ideas, concepts are important because they are the foundation of communication and thought. Concepts provide a means for people to let others know what they are thinking and allow information to be shared. Thus, instead of describing a youth who is involved with drugs, crime, or truancy, or has problems with parents and other adults, I might simply use the concept of *delinquent* to communicate these same elements (ideas). By *conceptualizing* a set of behaviors or ideas as part of a coherent package, we can describe a range of possible ideas, relations, and outcomes with a single term. Since concepts are abstract representations; of course, they contain a much broader range of possibilities than what any individual case is likely to contain. Most delinquent youths, for example, are not all that delinquent, while others are so far out there that we might prefer the term “criminal.”

Concepts can be found everywhere, and people use them all of the time without actually thinking about them as concepts (Silverman, 2006). For example, age is a concept that is so commonly used that few people stop to think about what it means. Even though people often think they understand the meaning of the concept, they may hesitate when asked to offer a specific definition. We often use precise numbers to describe ages when we are really seeking to communicate abstract concepts, such as “young” or “elderly.” Or we mentally translate such terms from the abstract “middle-aged” to some approximate age range. All of this is dependent of context as well. A jazz musician might seem fairly young at the age of 50, while a football player is getting old at 29.

As data, age actually represents an abstract idea about the number of cumulative years that an individual has been alive. In research, other related ideas, such as health or infirmity, stage in the life course, or work experience, must be specified separately rather than assumed as attributes of one’s age. Although this may seem to make the term stiff, it also ensures that there is a common understanding for the meaning of this concept. Concepts used

in social scientific research similarly may seem obvious at first, but they must always be clearly defined.

Typically, concepts have two distinct parts: a *symbolic* element (a word, symbol, term, etc.) and an associated *definitional* element. People learn definitions for certain concepts in a variety of ways. For example, children may learn the concept of *honesty* explicitly when a parent or teacher specifically instructs them on its meaning. Or it may be learned implicitly through a more diffuse, nonverbal process of observed instances in which either dishonest behavior is corrected or honest behavior is rewarded (either through comments or actions). In either case, eventually each of us comes to apprehend the meaning of honesty. Yet, if asked to define it, people may offer slightly different shades of understanding. One person might say, "Honesty is not lying to people." Another might offer, "Honesty is not taking property that belongs to other people." And a third individual might claim that "honesty is being able to be trusted to do what you promise to do." Obviously, these responses suggest that even a fairly common concept may have multiple meanings. Each of these definitions is valid on its own merits (some would say "true"). Yet, they are different from one another and therefore each definition addresses only some small portion of the larger concept. Unlike dictionary definitions, which are intended to cover all known uses of a term, scientific definitions need to highlight the (usually) single meaning that is pertinent to one's study. In the social sciences, vague or unclear definitions create enormous problems. Specificity is critical when conducting research. Therefore, an important part of developing social scientific theory is to first define relevant concepts that will be used in a given research process or project.

Indistinct, unclear, or vague definitions of concepts create obstacles to the advancement of knowledge and science. After noting that there were many different definitions in the literature for the concept *gang*, Richard Ball and G. David Curry (1995, p. 239) explained the term carried too many "latent connotations" to be treated as a single thing. By "latent connotations" the authors refer to the vast world of conceptual associations that the term "gang" carries. While one researcher might describe a new pattern of urban school kids grouping together for status and mutual protection as "increasing gang presence in the schools," readers might well assume that gang presence means weapons, drugs, fights, or the allegiance of school groups to well-known regional gangs such as the Crips or the Latin Kings. Presumably, fewer people will assume that the term refers to biker gangs or chain gangs. But any vagueness in the use of key concepts invites speculation. The need for this sort of specific definition of concepts will be made clearer later in the discussion on operationalization.

Concepts rarely occur in isolation. Rather, they occur in what Neuman (2000, p. 43) refers to as *concept clusters* or what we may call *propositions*. One can connect different concepts or conceptual thoughts to each other through propositions.

Propositions, then, are statements about relationships between concepts (Maxfield & Babbie, 2007). Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest that although a concept may fit or not (may or may not convey the intended meaning), propositions aim to be either right or wrong statements of fact, although the research may not be able to prove them. Testable propositions about the relations among our research concepts form a special class of propositions called *hypotheses*. Propositions, as discussed later, are the statements that make up theories.

2.2: Ideas and Theory

2.2 Explain how research progresses from the original idea

Every research project has to start somewhere; typically, the starting point is an idea. The big question, however, is how to go about finding an idea that will serve as a good launching point to a research project. For some students, this genuinely is the most difficult part of the research process. Actually, many people arrive at their research ideas simply by taking stock of themselves and looking around. For example, a nurse might observe a coworker coming to work under the influence of alcohol and begin to think about how alcohol would influence nursing care. From this initial thought, the idea for researching impaired nurses might arise. A counselor at a delinquency detention center might notice that many of her clients have been battered or abused prior to their run-in with the law. From her observation, she might wonder how abuse might be linked with delinquency and how she could investigate this linkage.

In some situations, ideas derive from information you hear but may not actually experience yourself. For instance, you're sitting at home listening to the news, and you hear a report about three people from wealthy families who have been caught burglarizing houses. You wonder: Why on earth did they do something like that? What motivates people who don't need money to steal from others? Or, you read in the newspaper that a man living around the corner from you has been arrested for growing marijuana in his garage. You think back to the times you passed this man's house and smiled a greeting at him. And you wonder: Why didn't I realize what he was up to? Who was he going to sell the marijuana to anyhow? From these broad curiosities, you might begin to think about how these questions could be explored or answered and how you might research these phenomena. Or you might think more generally about how we define particular forms of crime as "urban" as though they couldn't occur in the suburbs, from which you might define research questions about why some people receive long prison sentences and others short ones for the same crimes.

The preceding examples serve two important purposes. First, they point out how ideas promote potential research endeavors. Second, and perhaps more important, they suggest

a central research orientation that permeates this book. This orientation is the attitude that the world is a research laboratory and that you merely need to open your eyes and ears to the sensory reality that surrounds all of us to find numerous ideas for research. In fact, once you become familiar with this orientation, the biggest problem will be to filter out all the many possible researchable ideas and actually investigate one!

Most experienced qualitative researchers will agree that if you drop an investigator into any neighborhood, he or she will manage to identify a research idea, develop a research plan, and project potential research findings before lunch. I sit on a morning commuter train and look around me. The difference between the crowded rush-hour trains and the sparsely populated later trains is extreme. How did we come to define “work hours” in such a regimented fashion? How is this changing as more people are able to “telecommute”? If the manufacturing sector is shrinking in the United States, while service work is growing—and service work is increasingly done around the clock—why is rush hour still so crowded? And what about other parts of the world where manufacturing is increasing? Are these places experiencing greater rush-hour traffic than before? How will they choose whether to build more roads for private cars or more train lines for mass transit? And finally, why do people making private phone calls in public places, like trains, talk so much more loudly than everyone else? I could spend the rest of my career trying to understand this train.

This notion is likely to contrast dramatically with the inexperienced researcher’s fear that he or she cannot even think of anything worthwhile to research. There may be considerable truth to the optimistic view of experienced researchers. This does not mean, however, that all research ideas will be equally easy or interesting to research.

Some ideas will be more difficult to investigate than others. This is because those who control access to a given location—what the literature calls gatekeepers—or the subjects themselves may be reluctant to cooperate. Gatekeepers are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6. Also, some ideas may initially seem extremely interesting but become rather plain or uninspiring on further investigation. Some ideas are interesting to think about but impractical, unethical, or even impossible to study in a rigorous fashion. The impacts of emotional trauma, for example, can be inferred through many case studies of trauma victims, but you cannot test these inferences in an isolated experimental setting without deliberately inflicting trauma on your research subjects. Some students understand research in relation to findings that they have been taught in other sociology classes. For example, the research question “Do advertisements represent women in a sexually exploitive fashion?” was once an important question to look into. Now, after years of study, we know the answer is yes, and until something changes in the advertising field to call that into question, it is much less useful or interesting

to conduct new research just to show that it’s still the same. Similarly, many sociology texts like this one have, for years, used presumably familiar examples of research questions pertaining to binge drinking on campuses or peer pressure in high schools that we may have collectively contributed to the impression that these are urgent social problems that require active research immediately. Yet, unless you have something truly innovative to add to these frequently discussed subjects, there is little benefit to running around campus asking people how much they drink.

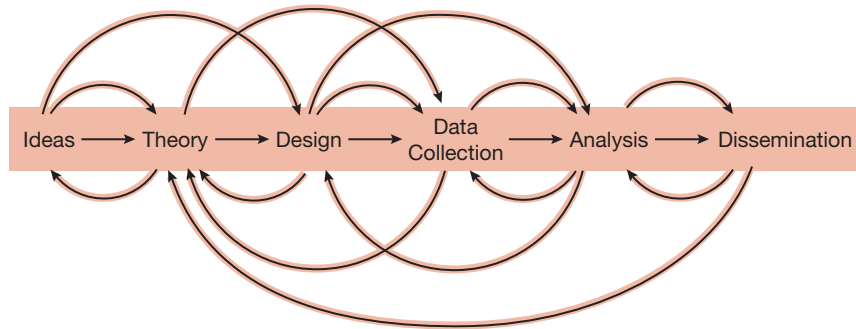
So, you begin with an idea. But how is this related to theory? Many research projects begin with formal statements of the ideas and theory on which the empirical research is to be based. This has been called the *theory-before-research model* (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2007). This orientation has been nicely described by Karl Popper (1968), who suggested that one begins with ideas (conjectures) and then attempts to disprove or refute them through tests of empirical research (refutation). And yet, theory is based on data. Research must occur before theory can be developed. This *research-before-theory* orientation was expressed by Robert Merton (1968), who emphasized that research was an integral part of every stage in the development and testing of theory. In other words, research may suggest new problems for theory, require theoretical innovation, refine existing theories, or serve to challenge past theoretical assumptions.

The approach offered in this book views theory-before-research and research-before-theory perspectives as highly compatible, and most researchers move comfortably between them. Realistically, we often adopt an approach that encompasses both models. The research process is conceived as spiraling rather than linear in its progression. You begin with an idea, gather theoretical information, reconsider and refine your idea, begin to examine possible designs, reexamine theoretical assumptions, and refine these theoretical assumptions and perhaps even your original or refined idea. Thus, with every two steps forward, you take a step or two backward before proceeding any further. What results is no longer a linear progression in a single, forward direction. Rather, you are spiraling forward, never actually leaving any stage behind completely. This spiraling approach is drawn in Figure 2.1.

To simplify understanding of the individual elements of this model as I discuss them, let’s redefine the stages slightly, as follows:

Ideas → Literature Review → Design → Data Collection
and Organization → Analysis and Findings →
Dissemination

As illustrated, you begin with some sort of rough *idea* for a research study. The next stage in the process is to begin thinking and reading about the topical idea. As you begin reading related and relevant literature on the topic,

Figure 2.1 The Spiraling Research Approach

you should also start turning this idea into a *research question* or even a set of researchable foci. As suggested by the fluidity of the spiraling approach offered in this chapter, your research idea should flow into a potential research question that may continue to shift, change, and take form as the research process unfolds. Even though your research question(s) may change as you proceed through the research process, it is important to establish a focus for your research question or a series of research aims.

2.3: Reviewing the Literature

2.3 Describe the importance of authentic literature in research

After developing a rough idea for the study, you will need to begin examining how others have already thought about and researched the topic. Let's say an idea for some research begins with an interest in alcohol use by male college students, despite my warnings that this ground has been covered extensively already. You might formulate a rough question for research such as the following: What is the relationship between college and drinking among American males? This rough idea already shows elements of refinement. It has been limited to consideration of only American males. But it is still very general and unfocused. The next step is to visit the library or its Web site to get started on a literature review. Because every library is different, you will need to familiarize yourself with the sorts of databases, periodicals, and books that are readily available to you. Most periodicals are available to browse online through databases such as Infotrac or Research Navigator's ContentSelect, but for books you have to actually go to a building. Some libraries have subscriptions to many journals, but not all of these may be useful for social science research, let alone a specific topic such as alcohol drinking by American male college students. Different libraries also provide different methods for accessing materials, including large selections of in-print periodicals maintained both in current stacks and in bound versions in back stacks or in the open library. As convenient as pdfs

are, the fastest way to immerse yourself in a new topic is still to spend a few hours pulling bound volumes off of shelves and browsing the most promising articles in them.

The next task is to begin thinking creatively about cryptic subject topics related to your rough research idea or question and to search for these topics in the indexes. For the preceding example, you might make a list that includes "alcohol use," "collegiate alcohol use," "alcohol on campus," "drinking," "males and alcohol," "masculinity," "Americans and alcohol," "social drinking," "substance abuse in college," "campus problems," and so forth. It is important to develop a number of different subject areas to search. Some will be more fruitful than others, and perhaps some will yield little information. This is because both the print versions and computer-based versions of indexes are created by humans. Because of this, indexes unavoidably suffer from the problem of terminological classification bias. In other words, even though these indexes are cross-referenced, if you do not use the same term or phrase used by the original indexer, you may not locate the entries he or she has referenced. Your search of the academic literature is guided by your research topic, but the literature search itself will help you to refine your questions. Only after you have immersed yourself in what is known about the topic, what is speculated about, and what is unknown can you define the useful angle for your study that can promise to make an actual contribution.

A promising research project can be quickly derailed by a weak literature review. For instance, some years ago, Bruce Berg became interested in the idea of doing research about women in policing. More directly, he was interested in the effect of policing on female officers. He asked his graduate student to see if she could locate some material about female police officers. (Getting your graduate students to do an initial search is one of the most effective ways to begin a project.) When she returned the next day, she reported that there was virtually nothing in any of the index databases on the topic "female police officers." Berg asked if she had tried "women in policing," or "women police officers," or even "minorities in policing." Sheepishly, she explained she had not thought to do that and returned to the library. When she returned,

she was carrying a list of literally dozens of references. I have seen many instances of similar thinking among students who are first learning to conduct research. Returning to the preceding example, many of my past students have proposed research on male college drinking only to declare that there is virtually no literature on “campus drinking by men” or “why men in college drink.” Yet, using the separate searches mentioned earlier would yield thousands of relevant articles. The lesson to be learned from this is that you must not be too restrictive in your topics when searching for reference materials in indexes. In fact, most online indexes provide users with a thesaurus to assist them in locating subject terms used to index material in the database.

When beginning your literature review, it is no longer necessary to arrive at your library empty handed and hoping to stumble across good materials. Library catalogs, database search engines, book reviews, and journal tables of contents are all available online and may be scoured for promising sources from the comfort of your own coffee shop. The majority of academic articles may be downloaded in pdf format depending on your library subscription services. You can pore through these more immediately accessible works, saving your actual visit for older or harder-to-find books and articles. Still, there is much to be gained by casual browsing in the library stacks. Search engines, databases, and the vast information available via the Internet are wonderful tools and places to begin searching for literature. They can provide enormous amounts of information. But they only give you access to the information that someone else has already added to the pertinent databases. Frequently, however, there is no substitute for physically thumbing through journal indexes. It is also important when using the Internet to be careful about the legitimacy of materials taken from the Web, which we will now consider in detail.

2.3.1: Evaluating Web Sites

In the years since the first edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences* was published, Internet searches have become the first, and often the only, information source for many millions of users, including professional researchers. Google even provides separate search levels called *Scholars* and *Books*. We strongly endorse, and rely on, these different tools, but they are not the sole source of literary materials a good researcher should employ. Google Scholar, for example, is full of papers and articles that can be downloaded in their entirety; unfortunately, many of these require a fee or membership in some sort of literary subscription. Google Books allows one to explore thousands of books—but not in their entirety. Sometimes, the topic one is seeking does yield enough information to be used, and the full citation information is provided in the search. However, at other times, only

segments of the information are reproduced, and one must still acquire the actual text from the library or through a purchase. And unlike scientific research tools, Internet search engines retrieve far more information that is of possible general interest but mostly useless in formal research. For example, access the Internet and try running a search for the term “concept.” The initial results may be less than useful if you are writing a scholarly term paper, article, research report, or proposal.

We need to make an important distinction here between the Internet as a document delivery service and the Internet as a document repository. In the first case, the traditional materials of basic research—peer-reviewed scientific articles—may be downloaded via the Internet right to your computer. The *source* of the materials is the journal in which it was first published, whether you got your copy by photocopying, downloading, or from a published reader (e.g., Lune, Pumar, & Koppel, 2009). The Internet just gets you the article faster. In the second case, however, the materials were actually published on the Web and can only be accessed through an Internet search. As a very general rule of thumb, the first set of materials is valid and useful while the second is suspect and unreliable. Reviewing the literature in a field of study means reading valid research, not abstracts, blogs, magazine articles, rants, or encyclopedias.

We take the Internet for granted, and such complacency with this technology can be dangerous for a researcher. Yes, the Internet is enormously fast, and yes, it has evolved in less than three decades to provide access to many millions of documents. However, the quality and integrity of all the available documents are not equal. The Internet epitomizes the concept of *caveat lector*—*Let the reader beware*.

The Internet allows you to access information from a variety of governmental and private sources, as well as from online electronic journals, books, commentaries, archives, and even newspapers. Most governmental agencies have Web sites that offer the public copies of recent (and often backlogged) reports, pamphlets, news releases, and other forms of information. There are also Web sites, however, that offer inaccurate, erroneous, or fabricated information. I once had the unpleasant experience of reading a student “research” paper on homosexuality in America that was entirely based on information he had downloaded from a couple of hate-group sites. Amazingly, the student had (apparently) skimmed the materials so carelessly that he accepted their claims as established facts without even noticing the death threats, support for Nazi extermination programs, or frequent use of curses and other invectives. He hadn’t realized that the sites were not valid and reliable sources of data. Granted, this is an extreme example: sort of the Internet-age version of writing your term paper on the bus ride to school on the morning that it’s due. With just a little care, this

error would never have occurred. But other errors may be harder to detect. It is critical that you carefully evaluate documents before quoting them. Here are a few questions you might want to consider before accepting information from a Web site as valid:

1. *Whose Web site is it?* Before you even start to consider the veracity of the text on a particular Web site, look at the URL to get a sense of the authenticity of the material on that site. Personal pages are not necessarily inaccurate, but you should nonetheless consider the authority and expertise of the author very carefully. Just about anyone with a computer can launch and maintain his or her own Web site. When you consider using information taken from an individual's personal Web site, you still should be cautious and consider the credibility of the individual or group that is operating and maintaining the site.

2. *What is the nature of the domain?* The *domain* represents a kind of hierarchical scheme for indicating the logical and sometimes geographical venue of a Web page. In the United States, common domains are .edu (education), .gov (government agency), .net (network related), .com (commercial), and .org (nonprofit and research organizations). Outside the United States, domains indicate country: ca (Canada), cn (China), uk (United Kingdom), au (Australia), jp (Japan), fr (France), and so forth. Is this an official government Web site or that of a well-known and reputable organization? Is it operated and maintained by a private group that has a special purpose or motive for having the site and offering the materials you are considering? As I mentioned earlier, there are a number of Web sites sponsored by hate groups. The information offered on such sites may sound like the reports of scientific studies, and the reports and documents may even look official. Yet, much of the information on these sites is likely biased and designed to be self-effacing and positive in order to sway readers to think favorably about the group's viewpoints.

3. *Is the material current or dated?* You should check to see how frequently the Web site is updated. If the materials have not been updated recently, you may want to question how reliable a source it is. Consider also whether links are active or have expired or moved. Naturally, just because a site is well maintained and information is regularly updated doesn't mean it is necessarily a good site in itself, and some material may not require constant updates. However, issues of currency are important when conducting research and should be considered when evaluating information taken from a Web site.

4. *Can the information be corroborated?* Sometimes the material you find on a Web site seems odd or unusual, and further investigation suggests that it may not be truthful. When this happens, do not use it. Often when you undertake a search using an Internet search engine,

you get many hits. Do not use only the first one you find. Carefully check a number of comparable sites to ensure the information is comparable. If you find that there are glaring contradictions or discrepancies, you should be very cautious about using this information.

2.3.2: Content versus Use

By now, you should have begun to amass a large quantity of documents to include in your review of the literature. Naturally, you will need to begin taking some form of notes on the various pieces of literature you have obtained. There are a number of ways you can keep such records and notes. What follows are a few general suggestions for organizing your work. There are no rules, however, and you will do best to discover the style that works best for your own ways of thinking.

It is difficult to educate yourself on a new area of study while also learning who the key authors are in this area while also becoming familiar with the specialized vocabulary of research on the topic while thinking about the meaning of the findings presented while planning the paper that you will write. It helps if you can break the work down into different parts. I prefer to maintain a strict distinction between two questions: What does the material say? And how does this relate to me? In other words, taking notes on the content of the literature you study is distinct from taking notes on how to use that literature in your own work.

Writing notes on the content of research articles and books is a lot like preparing a junior high school book report. First, record the full citation information for the article or other source. Next, identify the major claim(s), methods, and subject matter of the work. Under that, begin to write out all of the best parts—the quotable explanations, definitions, and findings that make this work unique. Quote each exactly, with quotation marks, and note the page numbers. When you are done, you should have a brief file that encapsulates the key parts of your source, making it much easier to draw on when you write. Chapter 12 discusses the problems with paraphrasing and with careless use of quotes in the section about plagiarism. There are other benefits to careful quoting.

Copying over exact quotes often seems tiresome and unnecessary. Since we are primarily interested in ideas, not phrases, one might think that a paraphrase is better. I recommend otherwise. If you, as an investigator, paraphrase material in your content notes, it is possible that you might slant or alter meanings. Without intending to, you might have misread, misinterpreted, or poorly paraphrased material. When you go through the notes looking for agreement among authors, you might find paraphrased statements that seem to represent similar ideas, but that actually do not accurately represent the sentiments of the

original authors. Using verbatim excerpts ensures that this will not occur. Either the authors did say similar things or they did not. Also, block copying from pdfs into a word processor is faster and more accurate than typing it yourself.

I also recommend saving keywords with each file to describe the content. It may seem like extra work at the time, but it can be invaluable later when you need to find all of your sources on antidrug laws, or to locate that one piece you vaguely remember containing the story about the homeless dog. If it's possible, it also sometimes helps to make liberal use of subfolders to store your notes. Under the "social movements" folder, I might have folders for "American" and "European" cases, or "cultural" movements in one and "material" goals in another. Of course the problem there is that you could have a European cultural movement that is pursuing the expansion of access to things of material value, in which case you could file that almost anywhere. This is why keywords are often more useful ways to identify source files.

With keywords, you can very quickly sort the summaries into different categories as you need them (e.g., placing all the notes about police detectives together, or all the theory pieces in one place). In this manner, you can assemble the material into an organized sequence that will reflect how you plan to write the report or paper. This allows you to read through the relevant materials for each section rather than repeatedly read through all of the material in order to write a single section.

Keyword searches also allow you to assess whether multiple authors actually have made similar statements about issues or situations. In turn, you are able to make strong synthesized statements regarding the work or arguments of others. For example, you might write, "According to Babbie (2007), Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2007), and Leedy and Ormrod (2004), the design stage is a critically important element in the development of a research project." Making such a synthesized statement, which collapses the arguments of three individuals into one, can be easily accomplished because you would have notes for each author conveying this sort of general sentiment.

I have violated all of this advice at times, and so I have learned the hard way about the importance of good record keeping. Before we all had laptops, I had actual folders with pieces of paper in them to store my notes. To save time, I would write the author's name on the top of a note sheet without writing down the title. Weeks later, after I had inserted a great quote from "Smith" into my paper, I would have to take it out again because I was unable to figure out if this was Dorothy Smith (1987), Michael Peter Smith (1998), or someone else altogether. I still have a folder containing an entire conference presentation without a single citation in it. I would love to rewrite the

material for publication, but I have no usable sources for any of my claims.

Fortunately, there are technological solutions for those of us too rushed or too lazy to write everything down. Most of the databases that you might use to find many of your materials—whether books or articles—will also allow you to save the complete citations in any of the standard writing styles. And many will generate records suitable for a bibliography program. Bibliography software is extremely useful for storing accurate and complete lists of materials you have read, whether you ended up using them in your current paper or not. They also allow you to store keywords with each record, which we know is helpful. And since you can download the citations and copy them into files with a few keystrokes, you have little opportunity to introduce typos. Your university library may offer free or reduced-cost software for this, and many programs can be downloaded for little or no money anyway. You can try out a few and decide for yourself.

First, though, we need to think about how we use all of these notes.

New work is built on a foundation of old work. We take the best of what is currently known and weave it together to form the solid ground on which to place our own, new, contributions. The content notes that I described earlier are not such a foundation. To push the metaphor a little more, they are the materials from which we construct that foundation.

Let's imagine that I am starting a study of teen drug use. Clearly, some of my background literature would come from the field of juvenile delinquency studies, from which I would learn of the statistical distributions of different forms of youthful criminal behavior, the nature of interventions and their success and failure rates, and criminological theories for such behavior. All of this is a start, but little of it would be exactly on my topic. The youths I'm studying aren't necessarily thieves or thugs, gang members, or even dropouts. Most of them are probably suburban stoners. But the delinquency literature is one pillar.

There is a rich social-psychological research literature on adolescence. One can get lost in such a broad field, soaking up thousands of pages of new information. For the sake of efficiency, I would need to limit my reading with the strategic use of additional keywords. I would obviously read about teen drug use, and teen drinking and probably teen smoking as well. This body of research would provide another pillar, with theories and data about the nature and causes of adolescent behaviors that are viewed as "antisocial." Notice that "antisocial" behavior will overlap with some of what the delinquency literature calls "criminal" behavior. Relating the two to each other, or separating them in a useful way, is part of my job as the writer of my own research paper.

A third pillar for this work might come from research on families. There might be household-level data that I would want to consider. Of course, the drug of choice among youths varies by socioeconomic status. Powdered cocaine is more popular among people who can afford it, while crack cocaine is accessible to low-income consumers. Heroin goes in and out of fashion, while marijuana remains the perennial favorite among casual users. I would certainly want to know more about who is typically using what in order to both plan and describe my research.

Finally, at least for purposes of this discussion, there are classic works that simply have to be included if I'm going to make any sort of conceptual argument about my topic. If I want to investigate youth drug use in relation to *anomie*, then I will have some discussion of Durkheim. If I want to address the social context in which the drugs are used, or the meaning of the act to the users, then I would certainly start with Norman Zinberg's (1984) *Drug, Set, and Setting*.

With all of this research literature consumed and reduced to notes, I have my materials. But I still don't have my foundation. Simply listing all of the different viewpoints that all of this past work has claimed or demonstrated would produce more confusion than clarity. Results in one source, taken at face value, contradict the results of another. Each of the sources addresses some small part of my study, but none of them directly answer my question. (Notice that if one of them did answer my question, and I accepted that answer as valid and complete, then there would be no justification for me to do my work at all. We're supposed to use our work to go beyond our sources.) So how do I use my notes?

Let's recall the purpose of writing a literature review. You provide the background needed to educate your readers enough so that they can understand and follow what you are doing and so that they can appreciate the need for your work. The review of past research brings them up to speed, introduces and explains the major concepts with which you are working, does not introduce concepts that you don't need, and provides the motivation for your new research (Galvin, 1999). Ideally, by the time individuals have finished reading your background section, they should be on the edge of their seats wanting to know what you have found.

There are many ways to write a literature review section. A few of the things you might try to do when writing yours are as follows:

1. *Dispel myths.* One of the myths of drug use is that we could eliminate it entirely if we had just the right policies and strategies. Yet, studies indicate that drug use is universal, across all sorts of times and places, under all regime types, and through all kinds of economic and social conditions.
2. *Explain competing conceptual frameworks.* Some drug use studies center on the issue of blame. Are the users bad people? Are their parents so? Have their schools failed them? Other studies look at control efforts, police budgets, the availability of treatment options, and enforcement policies. So, one set of readings is concerned with the problems of supply, while others are all about demand.
3. *Clarify the focus of your own work.* I might, for example, explain the unique features of a symbolic interactionist approach to state that I am interested in understanding the meaning of the act (drug use) from the perspective of the user, and not from the perspective of parents or politicians.
4. *Justify assumptions.* Drug use patterns are cyclical. The popularity of specific drugs rises and falls endlessly. By using government data on drug sales and arrests, I can back up my claim that declines in use of one drug are usually accompanied by increases in the use of others. Therefore, I might reject a local mayor's claim that his own policies toward drug control are responsible for the recent decline in whatever drug is going out of favor.

The main point is that your literature review section is like an essay on the background to your topic. It has an introduction, in which you explain what your topic is and what you are reviewing. It has a point, which is to support your research question and your design. There is the body of the paper, in which you present the information that defines the background to your work. Therefore, you can start with an outline as you might for a larger paper. And this is where you start to map out a strategy for putting your content notes to use. You can lay out the major claims of the literature, decide what order to address them in, and begin to write out notes about what you want your readers to understand about the material. Ultimately, you would produce a coherent essay that flows from the introduction to the conclusion, touching on the various works of the field along the way.

Returning to the example above, my written literature review on drug use might emphasize the transitory nature of most use, in contrast to the literature on addiction. I would emphasize the situationally specific nature of much use and include references to research on how and when people stopped using whatever they had been using. These references to research findings would include citations to the sources of the information. But the writing is about the findings, not the sources. Few things are as boring as a list of things other people have said. You may have an early draft of your paper that says, "researcher A looked at smoking practices . . . , but researcher B found otherwise In researcher C's study," But don't hand that in. The final version should contain a paragraph or