Qualitative Data Collection

OBJECTIVES

After reading Chapter 15, you should be able to do the following:

1. Define and state the purpose of qualitative data collection.
2. Identify the sources of qualitative data collection.
3. Identify specific qualitative data collection techniques and how they can be used in a qualitative study.
4. Describe the differences between unstructured and structured interviews.
5. Identify the threats to quality of observations and interviews in qualitative research.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION: DEFINITION AND PURPOSE

After obtaining entry into a setting and selecting participants, the qualitative researcher is ready to begin data collection, also commonly called *fieldwork*. **Fieldwork** involves spending considerable time in the setting under study, immersing oneself in this setting, and collecting as much relevant information as possible as unobtrusively as possible. Qualitative researchers collect descriptive—narrative and visual—nonnumerical data in order to gain insights into the phenomena of interest. Because the data that are collected should contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon studied, data collection is largely determined by the nature of the problem. There is no one recipe that tells how to proceed with data collection efforts. Rather, the researcher must determine what data will contribute to his understanding and resolution of a given problem and collect the appropriate and accessible data for that problem.

TYPES OF DATA COLLECTION SOURCES

Observations, interviews, questionnaires, phone calls, personal and official documents, photographs, recordings, drawings, journals, e-mail messages and responses, and informal conversations are all sources of qualitative data. Bear in mind that many sources are acceptable to use in data collection as long as the collection approach is ethical, feasible, and contributes to an understanding of the phenomenon under study. The most commonly used sources, however, are observations and interviews. Each of these data types shares one common aspect: The researcher is the primary data collection instrument.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The typical qualitative study involves a number of different data collection strategies, and although all options are open, some strategies are used more often than others. The three primary data collection techniques we will discuss in this chapter are observing, interviewing, and examining records.

Observing

In observation, qualitative researchers obtain data by simply watching the participants. The emphasis during observation is on understanding the natural environment as lived by participants, without altering or manipulating it. For certain research questions, observation is the most appropriate and effective data collection approach. If you ask teachers how they handle discipline in their classrooms, for example, you run the risk of collecting biased

information. By actually observing the classes, you will obtain much more objective information that can be "checked" against the self-reports of the research participants. There are two common types of observation: participant and nonparticipant observation.

Participant Observation

In **participant observation,** the observer actually becomes a part of, a participant in, the situation being observed. In other words, the researcher participates in the situation while observing and collecting data on the activities, people, and physical aspects. A benefit of participant observation is that it allows the researcher to gain insights and develop relationships with participants that would not be possible if the researcher observed but did not participate. There are varying degrees of participant observation; a researcher can be an *active participant observer;* a *privileged, active observer;* or a *passive observer.* We will discuss these varying degrees of observation in detail in Chapter 17.

Although participant observation can provide valuable insights, it has drawbacks. The researcher may lose objectivity and become emotionally involved with participants, for instance, or may simply have difficulty participating and collecting data at the same time. In cases where the group under study is tight-knit and closely organized, participation may be difficult for both the researcher and the group. Before adopting the role of a participant observer, the researcher must decide how capable she will be at simultaneously participating in the situation and gathering the desired data. If it is not feasible for the researcher to be a full participant observer in the group being studied, it is best to be a nonparticipant observer.

Nonparticipant Observation

Nonparticipant observation, also called *external observation,* is observation in which the observer is not directly involved in the situation being observed. In other words, the researcher observes and records behaviors but does not interact or participate in the life of the setting being studied. Nonparticipant observers are less intrusive and less likely to become emotionally involved with participants than participant observers. On the other hand, nonparticipant observers may have more difficulty obtaining information on participants' opinions, attitudes, and emotional states.

Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons for a researcher to choose nonparticipant observation. First, the researcher may not have the background or needed expertise to meaningfully act as a true participant. Also, as already mentioned, the group being observed might be too closely organized for the researcher to easily fit in. For example, it might be awkward for a middle-aged researcher to be a true participant in a group of fifth graders. In these cases, nonparticipant observation would be the best way to observe the research setting.

Whether you are a participant or nonparticipant observer, you will need a method to document your observations. Field notes are the best way to collect and document what you observe.

Field Notes

Qualitative research materials gathered, recorded, and compiled (usually on-site) during the course of a study are known as **field notes.** Field notes describe, as accurately as possible and as comprehensively as possible, all relevant aspects of the situation observed. They contain two basic types of information: (1) descriptive information that directly records what the observer has specifically seen or heard on-site through the course of the study and (2) reflective information that captures the researcher's personal reactions to observations, the researcher's experiences, and the researcher's thoughts during an observation session.

Because field notes are the data that will be analyzed to provide the description and understanding of the research setting and participants, they should be

as possible. For example, don't simply write, "The class was happy." Instead, describe the activities of the students, the looks on their faces, their interactions with each other, the teachers' activities, and other observations that led you to think the class was happy. It is a good rule of thumb to avoid such words as *good, happy, useful,* and the like, and replace them with words describing what was actually seen or heard. Figure 15.1 illustrates both the descriptive and the reflective aspects of field notes. As you read Figure 15.1, notice the clarity and level of detail in the researcher's notes as he describes the physical setting, the actions of the students, and the interactions that took place. Each O.C. (observer's comments) entry represents a reflection that the researcher had while writing the descriptive field notes. They represent a more personal and subjective aspect of the field notes and should be distinguished from the descriptive material in the notes themselves. In the O.C. entries, you can probably identify times when the researcher wanted to note something unusual, something that had recurred, something that had to be explored, and the like.

Field notes can be taken in the actual setting or recorded as soon as possible after leaving the setting. However, because of the need for clarity and detail, whenever possible notes should be made in the field, during the observation, while fresh in the mind of the researcher. The longer the interval between observing and writing field notes, the more likely that there will be some distortion from the original observation. To aid in taking field notes in the setting, it is often useful to have a protocol, or list of issues, to guide observation. Protocols provide the researcher with a focus during the observation and also provide a common framework for field notes, making it easier to organize and categorize data across various sets of notes. A simple protocol for observation might include these topics:

- Who is being observed? How many people are involved, who are they, and what individual roles and mannerisms are evident?
- What is going on? What is the nature of the conversation? What are people saying or doing?
- What is the physical setting like? How are people seated, and where? How do the participants interact with each other?
- What is the status or roles of people; who leads, who follows, who is decisive, who is not? What is the tone of the session? What beliefs, attitudes, values, and so on, seem to emerge?
- How did the meeting end? Was the group divided, united, upset, bored, or relieved?
- What activities or interactions seemed unusual or significant?
- What was the observer doing during the session? What was the observer's level of participation in the observation (participant observer, nonparticipant observer, etc.)?

Certainly different studies with different participants in different settings would have alternative protocol questions. The aim here is not to be exhaustive, but to encourage you to develop and refine some form of protocol that will guide you in answering the overarching question, "What is going on here?" Figure 15.2 illustrates a simple protocol.

A protocol is an important tool for recording information from observation sessions. The following guidelines should also help you in successfully recording information and organizing field notes:

- Start slowly. Do not assume you know what you're looking for until you "experience" the setting and participants for a while.
- Try to enter the field with no preconceptions. Try to recognize and dismiss your own assumptions and biases and remain open to what you see; try to see things through the participants' perspectives.
- Write up your field notes as soon as possible. When you're done, list the main ideas or themes you've observed and recorded. Don't discuss your observation until the field notes are written; discussion may alter your initial perspective.
- List the date, site, time, and topic on every set of field notes. Leave wide margins to write in your impressions next to sections of the descriptive field notes. The wide margins also

FIGURE 15.1 Section of fieldnotes

March 24, 1980
Joe McCloud
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Westwood High
6th Set of Notes

THE FOURTH-PERIOD CLASS IN MARGE'S ROOM

I arrived at Westwood High at five minutes to eleven, the time Marge told me her fourth period started. I was dressed as usual: sport shirt, chino pants, and a Woolrich parka. The fourth period is the only time during the day when all the students who are in the "neurologically impaired/learning disability" program, better known as "Marge's program," come together. During the other periods, certain students in the program, two or three or four at most, come to her room for help with the work they are getting in other regular high school classes.

It was a warm, fortyish, promise of a spring day. There was a police patrol wagon, the kind that has benches in the back that are used for large busts, parked in the back of the big parking lot that is in front of the school. No one was sitting in it and I never heard its reason for being there. In the circular drive in front of the school was parked a United States Army car. It had insignias on the side and was a khaki color. As I walked from my car, a balding fortyish man in an Army uniform came out of the building and went to the car and sat down. Four boys and a girl also walked out of the school. All were white. They had on old dungarees and colored stenciled t-shirts with spring jackets over them. One of the boys, the tallest of the four, called out, "oink, oink, oink." This was done as he sighted the police vehicle in the back.

O.C.: This was strange to me in that I didn't think that the kids were into "the police as pigs." Somehow I associated that with another time, the early 1970s. I'm going to have to come to grips with the assumptions I have about high school due to my own experience. Sometimes I feel like Westwood is entirely different from my high school and yet this police car incident reminded me of mine.

Classes were changing when I walked down the halls. As usual there was the boy with girl standing here and there by the lockers. There were three couples that I saw. There was the occasional shout. There were no teachers outside the doors.

O.C.: The halls generally seem to be relatively unsupervised during class changes.

Two black girls I remember walking down the hall together. They were tall and thin and had their hair elaborately braided with beads all through them. I stopped by the office to tell Mr. Talbor's (the principal) secretary that I was in the building. She gave me a warm smile.

O.C.: I feel quite comfortable in the school now. Somehow I feel like I belong. As I walk down the halls some teachers say hello. I have been going out of my way to say hello to kids that I pass. Twice I've been in a stare-down with kids passing in the hall. Saying, "How ya' doin'?" seems to disarm them.

I walked into Marge's class and she was standing in front of the room with more people than I had ever seen in the room save for her homeroom which is right after second period. She looked like she was talking to the class or was just about to start. She was dressed as she had been on my other visits—clean, neat, well-dressed but casual. Today she had on a striped blazer, a white blouse and dark slacks. She looked up at me, smiled, and said: "Oh, I have a lot more people here now than the last time."

O.C.: This was in reference to my other visits during other periods where there are only a few students. She seems self-conscious about having such a small group of students to be responsible for. Perhaps she compares herself with the regular teachers who have classes of thirty or so.

There were two women in their late twenties sitting in the room. There was only one chair left. Marge said to me something like: "We have two visitors from the central office today. One is a vocational counselor and the other is a physical therapist," but I don't remember if those were the words. I felt embarrassed coming in late. I sat down in the only chair available next to one of the women from the central office. They had on skirts and carried their pocketbooks, much more dressed up than the teachers I've seen. They sat there and observed.

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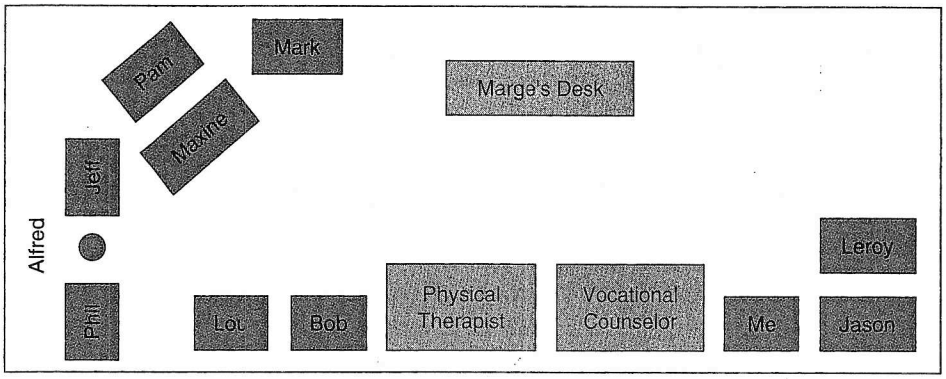
FIGURE 15.1 (continued)

Below is the seating arrangement of the class today:



Alfred (Mr. Armstrong, the teacher's aide) walked around but when he stood in one place it was over by Phil and Jeff. Marge walked about near her desk during her talk which she started by saying to the class: "Now remember, tomorrow is a fieldtrip to the Rollway Company. We all meet in the usual place, by the bus, in front of the main entrance at 8:30. Mrs. Sharp wanted me to tell you that the tour of Rollway is not specifically for you. It's not like the trip to G.M. They took you to places where you were likely to be able to get jobs. Here, it's just a general tour that everybody goes on. Many of the jobs that you will see are not for you. Some are just for people with engineering degrees. You'd better wear comfortable shoes because you may be walking for two or three hours." Maxine and Mark said: "Ooh," in protest to the walking.

She paused and said in a demanding voice: "OK, any questions? You are all going to be there. (Pause) I want you to take a blank card and write down some questions so you have things to ask at the plant." She began passing out cards and at this point Jason, who was sitting next to me, made a tutting sound of disgust and said: "We got to do this?" Marge said: "I know this is too easy for you, Jason." This was said in a sarcastic way but not like a strong put-down.

O.C.: It was like sarcasm between two people who know each other well. Marge has known many of these kids for a few years. I have to explore the implications of that for her relations with them.

Marge continued: "OK, what are some of the questions you are going to ask?" Jason yelled out "Insurance," and Marge said: "I was asking Maxine not Jason." This was said matter of factly without anger toward Jason. Maxine said: "Hours—the hours you work, the wages." Somebody else yelled out: "Benefits." Marge wrote these things on the board. She got to Phil who was sitting there next to Jeff. I believe she skipped Jeff. Mr. Armstrong was standing right next to Phil. She said: "Have you got one?" Phil said: "I can't think of one." She said: "Honestly Phil. Wake up." Then she went to Joe, the white boy. Joe and Jeff are the only white boys I've seen in the program. The two girls are white. He said: "I can't think of any." She got to Jason and asked him if he could think of anything else. He said: "Yeah, you could ask 'em how many of the products they made each year." Marge said: "Yes, you could ask about production. How about Leroy, do you have any ideas, Leroy?" He said: "No." Mr. Armstrong was standing over in the corner and saying to Phil in a low voice: "Now you know what kinds of questions you ask when you go for a job?" Phil said: "Training, what kind of training do you have to have?" Marge said: "Oh yes, that's right, training." Jason said out loud but not yelling: "How much schooling you need to get it." Marge kept listing them.

O.C.: Marge was quite animated. If I hadn't seen her like this before I would think she was putting on a show for the people from central office.

FIGURE 15.2
Sample of observation protocol

Setting:
Individual Observed:
Observation #: (first observation, second, etc.)
Observer Involvement:

Date/Time:
Place:
Duration of Observation (indicate start/end times):

Descriptive Notes (Detailed, chronological notes about what the observer sees, hears; what occurred; the physical setting)	**Reflective Notes** (Concurrent notes about the observer's thoughts, personal reactions, experiences)

provide space for doing initial coding and analysis. Write on only one side of a page. This will save you much photocopying when the time comes to "cut and paste" the field notes into different categories. Draw diagrams of the site.

- In writing field notes, first list key words related to your observation, then outline what you saw and heard. Then, using the key words and outline, write your detailed field notes.
- Keep the descriptive and reflective sections of field notes separate (although collected together). Focus on writing detailed descriptive field notes.
- Write down your hunches, questions, and insights after each observation. Use memos.
- Number the lines or paragraphs of your field notes. This will help you find particular sections when needed.
- Enter your field notes into a computer program for future examination and data analysis.

(For further discussion of field notes, refer to Chapter 17.)

Interviewing

Interviewing is the second major data collection technique. As you may remember from Chapter 6, an **interview** is a purposeful interaction in which one person is trying to obtain information from another. Interviews permit researchers to obtain important data they cannot acquire from observation alone, although pairing observation and interviewing provides a valuable way to gather complementary data. Observational data can suggest questions that can be asked in subsequent interviews with the participants in the study. For example, observation cannot provide information about past events, or the way things used to be before Mr. Hardnosed became principal, or why Ms. Haddit has had it and is considering transferring to another school. Information about these events cannot be observed; they must be obtained from peoples' own words. Interviewers can explore and probe participants' responses to gather more in-depth data about their experiences and feelings. They can examine attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns, and values more easily than they can through observation.

Interviews are distinguished by their degree of structure and formality. Some are **structured interviews**, with a specified set of questions to be asked, whereas others are **un-**

tured interviews combine both structured and unstructured approaches. Interviews may be formal and planned (we'll meet Tuesday at 1:00 to discuss your perceptions) or informal and unplanned (I'm glad I caught you in the corridor; I've been meaning to ask you . . .).

In addition to their structure and formality, interviews also vary in a number of other ways. For example, interviews may range in length from a few minutes to a few hours. They may consist of a one-time session or multiple sessions conducted over time with the same participant. In addition, participants may be interviewed individually or in groups.

Unstructured Interview

The unstructured interview is little more than a casual conversation that allows the qualitative researcher to inquire into something that has presented itself as an opportunity to learn about what is going on at the research setting. The point of informal interviews is not to get answers to predetermined questions, but rather to find out where the participants are coming from and what they have experienced. Often informal interviews are used further in the study to obtain more complex or personal information. Agar[1] suggests that researchers have a ready set of questions to ask participants by guiding the conversation around *who, what, where, when, why,* and *how.* Using these prompts, researchers will never be at a loss for a question to add to their understanding of what is happening in the research setting.

Structured Interview

Qualitative researchers may also want to consider formally interviewing research participants as part of their data collection efforts. In a formal, structured interview, the researcher has a specified set of questions that elicits specific information from the respondents. Using a structured interview format allows the qualitative researcher to ask all of the participants the same series of questions. A major challenge in constructing any interview, however, is to phrase questions in such a way that they elicit the information you really want. Although this may seem obvious, qualitative researchers often feel compelled by tradition to ask a lengthy set of questions, many of which stray from their focus. When planning interviews, consider the following options for ensuring the quality of your structured interviews:

- *Pilot questions on a similar group of respondents.* Try your questions out on a group of people who share similar characteristics with your research participants to see if the questions make sense. The participants' feedback will quickly confirm, or challenge, the assumptions (for example, about appropriate language) you have made while writing your questions. Using the feedback from this group, revise the questions before interviewing your participants.
- *Use questions that vary from convergent to divergent.* Use both open-ended and closed questions in a structured interview. For example, a closed (convergent) question allows for a brief response such as yes or no. Alternatively, an open-ended (divergent) question allows for a detailed response and elaboration on questions in ways you may not have anticipated. The information gathered through open-ended questions may be more difficult to make sense of, but it does allow the researcher to obtain important information that might otherwise be considered "outlying" or discrepant.

Guidelines for Interviewing

Although the concept of an interview seems straightforward, it can be a complex and difficult undertaking when the gender, culture, and life experiences of the interviewer and participant

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[1] The Professional Stranger: An Informal Introduction to Ethnography by M. H. Agar. 1980. Orlando, FL: Academic Press.

are quite different. There can be issues of who "controls" the interview, the accuracy of responses provided, and the extent to which the language of the interviewee and the researcher are similar enough to permit meaningful inferences about the topic under study. For these reasons, a researcher must always take the time to enter the research setting unobtrusively and build support and trust with participants before initiating an interview. A trusting relationship is essential if participants are to answers questions—particularly those on sensitive issues—with candor. In addition, the following actions can help improve communication and facilitate the collection of interview data:

- Listen more, talk less. Listening is the most important part of interviewing.
- Follow up on what participants say, and ask questions when you don't understand.
- Avoid leading questions; ask open-ended questions.
- Don't interrupt. Learn how to wait.
- Keep participants focused and ask for concrete details.
- Tolerate silence. It means the participant is thinking.
- Don't be judgmental about participants' views or beliefs; keep a neutral demeanor. Your purpose is to learn about others' perspectives, whether you agree with them or not.
- Don't debate with participants over their responses. You are a recorder, not a debater.

Collecting Data From Interviews

Interviewers have three basic choices for collecting their data: taking notes during the interview, writing notes after the interview, and audio- or videotaping the interview. Although all these approaches can be used in a study, certain ones are better suited than others. For example, taking notes during the interview can be distracting and can alter the flow of the session. Writing notes after the interview is better than trying to write during the interview; however, it can be difficult to remember the contents of the interview. Thus, the data collection method of choice is audio- or videotape recording, which provides a verbatim account of the session. Also, tapes provide researchers with the original data for use at any time. Although a few participants may balk at being recorded, most participants will not, especially if you promise them confidentiality. Make sure that the recording machine is in good working order (new batteries, too) before entering the interview setting.

To work most productively, it is useful to transcribe the tape recordings. This is a time-consuming task, especially for long interviews. Transcribing one 60-minute tape may take 4 or 5 more hours. If you choose to do the transcribing instead of hiring someone to transcribe (a costly alternative), it would help to use short interview sessions, if feasible. When transcribing, write the date, subject discussed, and participant (using a coded name) on the transcript. Number all pages. Make sure a different indicator is given and used to identify the various persons speaking on the tape.

The transcripts are the field notes for interview data. They should be reviewed against the tape for accuracy. Interview transcripts are voluminous and usually have to be reduced to focus on the data pertinent to the study. Sometimes this is difficult to do. During data analysis the transcript will be read and important sections labeled to indicate their importance. This process of culling the transcripts will be described in the next chapter.

Questionnaires

A third way to collect data from individual research participants is by using a questionnaire. As noted in Chapter 6, a **questionnaire** is a written collection of self-report questions to be answered by a selected group of research participants. The major difference between an interview and a questionnaire is that the participant will write out the responses on the form provided. Questionnaires allow the researcher to collect large amounts of data in a relatively short

amount of time. Although face-to-face interviews are an opportunity for the researcher to intimately know how each respondent feels about a particular issue, interviewing is very time-consuming. A compromise is to use a questionnaire (when appropriate) and to conduct follow-up interviews with research participants who have provided written feedback that warrants further investigation.

Since a solid data collection instrument will help ensure useful responses, you should consider the following guidelines for developing and presenting questionnaires:

- *Carefully proofread questionnaires before sending them out.* Nothing will turn respondents off quicker than receiving a questionnaire that is littered with errors.
- *Avoid a sloppy presentation.* Make the survey attractive, and consider using BIG print if necessary.
- *Avoid a lengthy questionnaire.* Piloting the instrument will give you a realistic sense of how long it will take your respondents to complete the task. Remember, no matter how much respondents want to help you, a questionnaire that's too long will find its way into the "circular file" instead of back into your hands.
- *Do not ask unnecessary questions.* Asking unnecessary questions is akin to teachers developing tests that don't match what was taught. Students are stumped, and teachers learn little about the effectiveness of their lessons. Likewise, as researchers, we often feel compelled to ask a great deal of trivial information on a questionnaire. Participants become frustrated, and we collect information that is tangential to our stated purpose.
- *Use structured items with a variety of possible responses.* Indicate what you mean by *often* and *frequently* and how they differ from each other. Otherwise, your respondents will interpret the meaning of the terms in quite different ways.
- *Whenever possible, allow for an "Other Comments" section.* An "Other Comments" section provides respondents with an opportunity to respond openly to your questions and to raise new questions. These comments provide you with an excellent source of discrepant data ("I hadn't expected someone to say that!") and an opportunity to follow up with an informal interview to elicit more information from the respondent as your time, energy, and inquisitiveness allow.
- *Decide whether you want respondents to put their names on the questionnaires or whether you will use a number to keep track of who has responded.* You should assure respondents that their confidentiality will be protected throughout the process. However, you can protect respondents while also keeping track of who has responded and deciding whether they have made comments that you feel warrant a follow-up conversation. If you do so, you must communicate to respondents that they will not suffer any negative consequences for anything they might share with you so they will feel comfortable supplying honest and forthright answers.

Examining Records

This third primary data collection technique is examining records. Qualitative researchers examine various types of records or documents, including archival documents, journals, maps, videotapes, audiotapes and artifacts. Many of these data sources are naturally occurring in educational settings and require only that the researcher locate them within the research setting.

Archival Documents

Like classrooms, schools are repositories for all sorts of records—student records, standardized test scores, retention rates, minutes of meetings (faculty, PTA, school board),

newspaper clippings about significant events in the community, and so on. With permission, the qualitative researcher can use these sources of data to gain valuable historical insights, identify potential trends, and explain how things got to be the way they are. Often, clerical assistants, school aides, and student teachers are happy to help with uncovering archival information and organizing it in a way that is most useful to the classroom teacher if they believe that it is contributing to the collective understanding of a pressing educational issue.

Journals

Daily journals kept by research participants are a valuable data source. Students' journals can provide teachers with a window into the students' world and their daily classroom experiences. This can have meaning for and impact future teaching practices. Daily journals kept by teachers give their accounts of what is happening in the classroom and provide a glimpse of the school from another perspective. Regardless of your specific research questions, you should encourage journaling by research participants as a way to keep track of their perceptions of what is going on in the research setting.

Maps

Qualitative researchers working in schools often find class maps and school maps useful for a number of reasons. They provide contextual insights for people who have not visited the school, and they provide the qualitative researcher with a reflective tool—a way of rethinking the way things are in schools and classrooms. For example, why are the computers in the classroom placed in a bank along one wall, and what are the effects of individual student computer time on other seatwork activities? A map can also record traffic flow in a classroom as well as teacher movement during instruction. The school map may also prove useful for teams of qualitative researchers concerned about the movement and interactions of different grade levels of students and any problems that emerge from the traffic flow. For qualitative researchers, context is everything! Figure 15.3 shows an example of a classroom map.

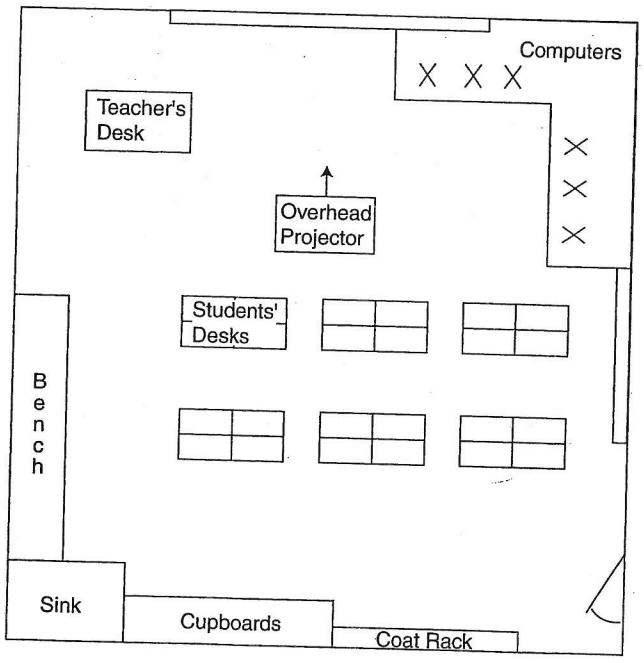

FIGURE 15.3

Classroom map example

Source: Mills, Geoffrey, *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher,* 2nd Edition, © 2003. Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

Videotape and Audiotape

Videotapes and audiotapes provide qualitative researchers with another valuable, if not somewhat obtrusive, data source. Of course, there are downsides to these techniques. For example, their presence in a classroom may elicit the usual "funny faces" and bizarre comments that we normally associate with the presence of such technology in a classroom for the first time. One way of moving ahead with these efforts is to introduce them into a classroom early in a research project and provide the illusion that the "camera is running" when, in fact, no film is in the camera. The use of audiotape and videotape also raises the serious issue of time allotment. Watching and listening to tapes and then recording observations takes an enormous amount of time. This is perhaps the number one challenge for researchers using these data sources.

Artifacts

Schools and classrooms are rich sources of what we might call *artifacts*—written or visual sources of data that contribute to our understanding of what is happening in classrooms and schools. The category of artifacts can include almost everything else that we haven't already discussed. For example, there has been a trend in schools to move toward "authentic assessment" techniques, including the use of student portfolios. A *portfolio* is a presentation of work that captures an individual student's work samples over time and the relative growth of that work. Portfolios, although difficult to quantify, provide the teacher with valuable outcome data that gets at the heart of the qualitatively different samples of work. Such artifacts are a valuable data source that qualitative researchers may use as a starting point for conversation with research participants.

⁘ THREATS TO THE QUALITY OF OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

Two main threats to the validity of observation and interview studies are observer bias and observer effect. For example, the situation may be "seen" differently than it would have been through the eyes of a different researcher (observer bias) or may be a somewhat different situation than it would have been if the researcher were not present (observer effect). Although these problems are not unique to qualitative research, they are potentially more serious because of the more intimate involvement of researcher and participants.

Observer Bias

Observer bias occurs when the observer does not observe objectively and accurately, thus producing invalid observations. Each researcher brings to a setting a highly individual background, set of experiences, and perspectives, which in turn affect not only what and how she observes but also her personal reflections and interpretations of the situation. Relatedly, the qualitative researcher runs the risk of identifying with one or more participants or being judgmental towards others. This results in somewhat distorted observations. For example, after attending a number of faculty meetings, a researcher might tend to identify with the teachers, and observations of principal–teacher interactions would be affected by this role identification.

Qualitative researchers must walk a fine line in their attempt to be both involved and objective, particularly during participant observation. Experienced qualitative researchers are aware of the challenge and use a number of strategies to minimize the effect of bias on the results of their research. First, researchers try to minimize the effects of their personal biases on their findings by conscientiously recording (in field notes) their thoughts and feelings about what they observe. Triangulation, the use of multiple data collection strategies and sources,

provides an additional, powerful safeguard. It is not likely that data derived from different sources and data collection strategies will all be biased in the same, unnoticed way. Working with several researchers and comparing everyone's observations helps reduce bias for the same reason. It is unlikely that data provided by several researchers will be so consistently biased that the bias will be undetected. Of course, detecting bias and eliminating it are not the same thing. Qualitative researchers do not claim that they can eliminate all bias. Instead, they recognize bias as a part of the research process and use the strategies discussed to reduce it.

Observer Effect

Whereas observer bias refers to a researcher's faulty interpretations of a situation, observer effect refers to changes in the situation caused by the researcher's presence. Specifically, **observer effect** is the phenomenon whereby persons being observed behave atypically simply because they are being observed, thus producing invalid observations. Would you behave exactly the same as you normally would on a given day if you knew you were being observed? Probably not. Although this problem is by no means unique to qualitative research, it is potentially more serious since the researcher is trying to study how people naturally behave in their settings.

A major strategy employed by researchers to reduce observer effect is to be as unassuming and nonthreatening as possible as they gradually increase their participation. Initially, persons in the observational setting may be highly conscious of the researcher's presence. However, the effect of the researcher's presence on the participants' behavior typically decreases over time. For example, at the first faculty meeting attended by the observer, behavior may be somewhat artificial (more formal or more cordial); but by the tenth faculty meeting, people will tend to be their usual selves. It also helps if the exact nature of the researcher's inquiry is not described in any more detail than is ethically or legally necessary. The fact that persons being observed may initially behave differently is bad enough; focusing on their behavior change is worse! For example, it would probably be sufficient if the "official" reason given for the researcher's presence were "to observe high school faculty meetings," rather than "to observe principal–teacher interactions." As with bias, qualitative researchers are well aware that they cannot totally eliminate observer effects. They do, however, make every effort to recognize, minimize, record, and report them.

Armed with the qualitative data collection techniques that will help you understand what is going on at your research setting, and your research questions, you are now ready to "enter the field" and start collecting data. This can be a scary proposition for new researchers. What follows are suggestions to help smooth your entry into your first qualitative research setting!

⁘ GETTING STARTED

Having obtained entry into a setting and having selected participants, the qualitative researcher is ready to begin data collection, or fieldwork. Regardless of how much you read, think about, and discuss fieldwork, you will not really know what it is like until you actually live it. Living an experience for the first time always means uncertainty in a new role—uncertainty about how to act and interact with others. Qualitative research, by its very nature, is a very intimate and open-ended activity. It is common to feel nervous as you learn the ropes, try to establish rapport with participants, and get a feel for the setting. Bogdan and Biklen[2] suggest a number of cautions to make the initial days of entry into the setting less painful:

- Do not take what happens in the field personally.
- Set up your first visit so that someone is there to introduce you to the participants.

[2] *Qualitative Research in Education*, by R. C. Bogdan and S. K. Biklen (3rd ed., pp. 79–81), 1998, Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

- Don't try to accomplish too much in the first few days. Make your initial visit for observation short. You will have to take field notes after each data collection encounter, so start with brief data collection episodes to ease into the process of writing field notes.
- Be relatively passive. Ask general, nonspecific, noncontroversial questions that allow participants to reply without being forced to provide answers they might find uncomfortable discussing with a relative "stranger." Ease your way into the context; don't storm in. The intent is for the participants to gradually become comfortable with you, and you with them. Then you can gradually increase your degree of involvement.
- Be friendly and polite. Answer questions participants and others ask, but try not to say too much about the specifics of your presence and purpose, so that you do not influence the participants.

In short, it is critical that you establish your "OKness" with the research participants with whom you will be working. Regardless of how well thought-out your study is, if your interpersonal skills are lacking, it will be difficult to develop the trust you will need to be accepted into the setting.

SUMMARY

Qualitative Data Collection: Definition and Purpose

1. Qualitative data collection, or fieldwork, involves spending considerable time in the setting under study, immersing oneself in this setting, and collecting as much relevant information as possible as unobtrusively as possible. Descriptive—narrative and visual—nonnumerical data are collected in order to gain insights into the phenomena of interest.
2. The decision about what data is collected is largely determined by the nature of the problem.

Types of Data Collection Sources

3. The qualitative research literature emphasizes the following data collection techniques and sources: observations, interviews, questionnaires, phone calls, personal and official documents, photographs, recordings, drawings, journals, e-mail messages and responses, and informal conversations.
4. In qualitative research the researcher is the primary data collection instrument.

Data Collection Techniques

5. The three primary data collection techniques in qualitative research are observing, interviewing, and examining records.

Observing

Participant Observation

6. A researcher who becomes a part of, a participant in, the situation being observed is called a *participant observer.*
7. Participant observation can be done to varying degrees; a researcher can be an active participant observer; a privileged, active observer; or a passive observer.

Nonparticipant Observation

8. In nonparticipant observation the observer observes but does not participate in the situation being studied.

Field Notes

9. Field notes are the record of what the observer has specifically seen or heard. In addition to these literal descriptions, field notes contain personal reactions, or what the observer has experienced and thought about during an observation session.

Interviewing

10. An interview is a purposeful interaction in which one person is trying to obtain information from another.
11. Pairing observation and interviewing provides a valuable way to gather complementary data.

12. The *unstructured interview* is little more than a casual conversation that allows the qualitative researcher to inquire into something that has presented itself as an opportunity to learn about what is going on at the research setting.
13. Using a *structured interview* format allows the qualitative researcher to ask all of the participants the same series of questions.
14. When planning interviews, consider the following options for ensuring the quality of your structured interviews:
    a. Pilot questions on a similar group of respondents.
    b. Use questions that vary from convergent to divergent.
15. Guidelines for interviewing include the following:
    a. Listen more, talk less.
    b. Follow up on what participants say, and ask questions when you don't understand.
    c. Avoid leading questions; ask open-ended questions.
    d. Don't interrupt. Learn how to wait.
    e. Keep participants focused and ask for concrete details.
    f. Tolerate silence. It means the participant is thinking.
    g. Don't be judgmental about participants' views or beliefs.
    h. Don't debate with participants over their responses.
16. Interviewers have three basic choices for collecting their data: taking notes during the interview, writing notes after the interview, and audio or videotaping the interview.

Questionnaires

17. The major difference between a structured interview schedule and a questionnaire is that the participant will write out the responses on the form provided.
18. Consider the following guidelines for developing and presenting questionnaires:
    a. Carefully proofread questionnaires before sending them out.
    b. Avoid a sloppy presentation.
    c. Avoid a lengthy questionnaire.
    d. Do not ask unnecessary questions.
    e. Use structured items with a variety of possible responses.
    f. Whenever possible, allow for an "Other Comments" section.
    g. Decide whether you want respondents to put their names on the questionnaires or whether you will use a number to keep track of who has responded.

Examining Records

19. Qualitative researchers can gain valuable information from examining various types of records or documents found in educational environments. These include archival documents, journals, maps, videotapes, audiotapes, and artifacts.

Threats to the Quality of Observations and Interviews

20. Two main threats to the validity of observation and interview studies are observer bias and observer effect.

Observer Bias

21. Observer bias occurs when the observer does not observe objectively and accurately, thus producing invalid observations.
22. It is generally accepted in qualitative research that researchers should use triangulation and should not rely on any single source of data, interview, observation, or instrument.

Observer Effect

23. Observer effect is the phenomenon whereby persons being observed behave atypically simply because they are being observed. Qualitative researchers should avoid drawing attention to the fact that study participants are under observation.

Getting Started

24. Do not take what happens in the field personally.
25. Set up your first visit so to the research setting that someone is there to introduce you to the participants.
26. During the first few days in the setting, don't try to accomplish too much, be relatively passive, and be friendly and polite.

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