

Constructing Grounded Theory

A Practical Guide Through
Qualitative Analysis

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2 Gathering Rich Data

Our grounded theory adventure starts as we enter the field where we gather data. We step forward from our disciplinary perspectives with a few tools and provisional concepts. A grounded theory journey may take several varied routes, depending on where we want to go and where our analysis takes us. Ethnographic methods, intensive interviewing, and textual analysis provide tools for gathering data as we traverse these routes. A brief excursion in this chapter explores the benefits each tool promises and the limits it imposes.

What do you want to study? Which research problem might you pursue? Which tools will help you proceed? How do you use methods to gather rich data? Rich data get beneath the surface of social and subjective life. An inquiring mind, persistence, and innovative data-gathering approaches can bring a researcher into new worlds and in touch with rich data. Consider how Patrick L. Biernacki (1986) began his grounded theory research for his book *Pathways from Heroin Addiction: Recovery without Treatment*:

The idea for this research originated several years ago during a study I was conducting of people who had stopped smoking marijuana (Biernacki & Davis, 1970). Although the reasons some people gave for finding it necessary to stop using marijuana might today seem insignificant, it was of interest at that time. Regardless of the relative importance of the research, it did bring me into contact with people who had been addicted to opiates along with marijuana, and who had stopped using the opiate drugs. This chance discovery of a few 'naturally' recovered addicts opened the door to a slew of questions about the ultimate fate of opiate addicts. Were the cases I found unusual? Were most addicts destined to remain addicted for their entire lives? Was some form of therapeutic intervention always necessary to break an opiate addiction? Or was it possible, at least for some people, to break the addiction and recover through their own resolve and effort? (p. 200)

The intriguing topic piqued Biernacki's curiosity. But how could he find data to study it? He states:

Locating and interviewing ex-addicts who had undergone some form of treatment would have presented few difficulties. ... Ferreting out respondents

who met the research criteria for *natural recovery* was another matter. ... In fact, because of the widely held belief that 'once an addict is always an addict,' many clinicians and researchers in the field thought that naturally recovering addicts, the focus of the proposed study, did not exist or if they did, it was not with any great frequency. (p. 203)

Like Biernacki's quest to find suitable study participants, your research adventure begins with finding data.¹ Discover how exciting empirical research can be through gathering rich data. Let the world appear anew through rich data. Gathering rich data will give you solid material for building a significant analysis. Rich data are detailed, focused, and full. They reveal participants' views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives. Obtaining rich data means seeking 'thick' description (Geertz, 1956) such as writing extensive fieldnotes of observations, collecting respondents' written personal accounts, and/or compiling detailed narratives (such as transcribed tapes of interviews).

Researchers generate strong grounded theories with rich data. Grounded theories may be built with diverse kinds of data—fieldnotes, interviews, and information in records and reports. The kind of data the researcher pursues depends on the topic and access. Often, researchers gather several types of data in grounded theory studies and may invoke varied data-gathering strategies. What do we need to think about to gain rich data for an emerging grounded theory? How might we construct rich data with our methodological tools?

Thinking about Methods

Seeing through Methods

Methods extend and magnify our view of studied life and, thus, broaden and deepen what we learn of it and know about it. Through our methods, we aim to see this world as our research participants do—from the inside. Although we cannot claim to replicate their views, we can try to enter their settings and situations to the extent possible. Seeing research participants' lives from the inside often gives a researcher otherwise unobtainable views. You might learn that what outsiders assume about the world you study may be limited, imprecise, mistaken, or egregiously wrong.

Qualitative researchers have one great advantage over our quantitative colleagues. We can add new pieces to the research puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles—while we gather data—and that can even occur late in the analysis. The flexibility of qualitative research permits you to follow leads that emerge. Grounded theory methods increase this flexibility and simultaneously give you more focus than many methods. Used well, grounded theory quickens the speed of gaining a clear focus on what is happening in your data without sacrificing the detail of enacted scenes. Like a camera with many lenses, first you view a broad sweep of the landscape. Subsequently, you change your lens several times to bring scenes closer and closer into view.

With grounded theory methods, you shape and reshape your data collection and, therefore, refine your collected data. Nonetheless, methods wield no magic. A method provides *a* tool to enhance seeing but does not provide automatic insight. We must *see through* the armament of methodological techniques and the reliance on mechanical procedures. Methods alone—whatever they might be—do not generate good research or astute analyses. How researchers use methods matters. Mechanistic applications of methods yield mundane data and routine reports. A keen eye, open mind, discerning ear, and steady hand can bring you close to what you study and are more important than developing methodological tools (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996).

Methods *are* merely tools. However, some tools are more useful than others. When combined with insight and industry, grounded theory methods offer sharp tools for generating, mining, and making sense of data. Grounded theory can give you flexible guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. With flexible guidelines, you direct your study but let your imagination flow.

Although methods are merely tools, they do have consequences. Choose methods that help you answer your research questions with ingenuity and incisiveness. *How* you collect data affects *which* phenomena you will see, *how*, *where*, and *when* you will view them, and *what* sense you will make of them.

Just as the methods we choose influence what we see, what we bring to the study also influences what we *can* see. Qualitative research of all sorts relies on those who conduct it. We are not passive receptacles into which data are poured (Charmaz, 1990, 1998; cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978). We are not scientific observers who can dismiss scrutiny of our values by claiming scientific neutrality and authority. Neither observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world. Researchers and research participants make assumptions about what is real, possess stocks of knowledge, occupy social statuses, and pursue purposes that influence their respective views and actions in the presence of each other. Nevertheless, researchers, not participants, are obligated to be reflexive about what we bring to the scene, what we see, and how we see it.

Let your research problem shape the methods you choose. Your research problem may point to one method of data collection. If, for example, you wanted to learn how people conceal a history of illegal drug use, then you need to think of ways you can reach these individuals, gain their trust, and obtain solid data from them. If they want to keep their pasts secret, they may refuse to fill out questionnaires or to participate in focus groups. However, people who define themselves as recovering addicts might agree to talk with you. Once you have established trust, someone who uses drugs might invite you to hang out in the scene.

Certain research problems indicate using several combined or sequential approaches. If you aim to explore experiences of living with cancer, you might be able to join a local support or volunteer group, conduct interviews, engage in Internet discussion groups, and distribute questionnaires. In any study, questions may occur to you during the research that lead you to construct new data-gathering methods and to revise earlier ones. Once you begin collecting data, your research participants may give you materials that you had not anticipated collecting but help to further your ideas. Some participants might invite you to

read their personal journals; others might tell you about organizational records that would give you information.

The logic of grounded theory guides your *methods of data-gathering* as well as of theoretical development. Aim to create or adopt methods that hold a promise of advancing your emerging ideas. Such innovation can occur at any point during the research. You will learn things during your research that you would have liked to have explored earlier. Think about what kind of approach would enable you to gain this needed data and in which type of setting you will find it. For one project, it might mean framing certain questions to allow participants to make disclosures, such as this question, 'Some people have mentioned having — experience. Have you experienced something like that?' Ethnographers and interviewers might return to research participants with whom they have already talked and ask this type of question. Numerous interviewers, however, face constraints of time, funding, or institutional access that permit only one interview per participant. These interviewers might ask subsequent participants such questions toward the end of the conversation in their interviews. For other projects and purposes, the researcher might find constructing an open-ended questionnaire helpful.

Barney G. Glaser (2002) says that 'All is data.' Yes, everything you learn in the research setting(s) or about your research topic can serve as data. However, data vary in quality, relevance for your emerging interests, and usefulness for interpretation. Researchers also vary in their ability to discern useful data and in their skill and thoroughness in recording them. Moreover, *people* construct data—whether researchers construct first-hand data through interviews or field-notes or gather texts and information from other sources such as historical documents, government records, or organizational information compiled for private discussion or public dissemination. We may treat such documents, records, and census data as facts; however, individuals constructed them. Whatever stands as data flows from some purpose to realize a particular objective. In turn, purposes and objectives arise under particular historical, social, and situational conditions.

Grounded theorists' background assumptions and disciplinary perspectives alert them to look for certain possibilities and processes in their data. These assumptions and perspectives often differ among disciplines but nonetheless shape research topics and conceptual emphases. Blumer's (1969) notion of sensitizing concepts is useful at this juncture. These concepts give you initial ideas to pursue and sensitize you to ask particular kinds of questions about your topic. Grounded theorists often begin their studies with certain guiding empirical interests to study and, consistent with Blumer, general concepts that give a loose frame to these interests. For example, I began my studies of people with chronic illnesses with an interest in how they experienced time and how their experiences of illness affected them.

Consistent with Blumer's (1969) depiction of sensitizing concepts, grounded theorists often begin their studies with certain research interests and a set of general concepts. These concepts give you ideas to pursue and sensitize you to ask particular kinds of questions about your topic.

My guiding interests led to bringing concepts such as self-concept, identity, and duration into the study. But that was only the start. I used those concepts as *points of departure* to form interview questions, to look at data, to listen to interviewees, and to think analytically about the data. Guiding interests, sensitizing concepts, and disciplinary perspectives often provide us with such points of departure for developing, rather than limiting, our ideas. Then we develop specific concepts by studying the data and examining our ideas through successive levels of analysis.

Professional researchers and many graduate students already have a sound footing in their disciplines before they begin a research project and often have an intimate familiarity with the research topic and the literature about it. All provide vantage points that can intensify looking at certain aspects of the empirical world but may ignore others. We may begin our studies from these vantage points but need to remain as open as possible to whatever we see and sense in the early stages of the research.

In short, sensitizing concepts and disciplinary perspectives provide a place to *start*, not to *end*. Grounded theorists use sensitizing concepts as tentative tools for developing their ideas about processes that they define in their data. If particular sensitizing concepts prove to be irrelevant, then we dispense with them. In contrast, the logico-deductive model of traditional quantitative research necessitates operationalizing established concepts in a theory as accurately as possible and deducing testable hypotheses about the relationships between these concepts. In this model, the research is locked into the original concepts.

What happens if your qualitative data do not illuminate your initial research interests? Pertti Alasuutari (1995) shows how his research team tackled this problem:

This process, in which we chewed over the main problems of our project and made false starts and rethought it all over again, is hardly an exceptional beginning for a research project. It's just that researchers rarely report on all of this. However, an early failure to choose the right road does not have to mean you are ultimately trapped in a dead-end. ... Revise your strategy on the basis of that result and you might be able to move on to another result.

In our case the false starts we made and the research ideas we had to discard as unrealistic in view of existing resources led to a better plan and clearer view of how the project should be carried out. (p. 161)

Grounded theorists evaluate the fit between their initial research interests and their emerging data. We do not force preconceived ideas and theories directly upon our data. Rather, we follow leads that we *define* in the data, or design another way of collecting data to pursue our initial interests. Thus, I started with research interests in time and self-concept but also pursued other topics that my respondents defined as crucial. For example, I felt compelled to explore their concerns about disclosing illness, something I had not anticipated. Their dilemmas about disclosing and feelings about doing so emerged as a recurrent theme.² Subsequently, I studied how, when, why, and with whom ill people talk about their conditions. More recently, I began to explore when and why chronically ill people remain silent about their illnesses (Charmaz, 2002b).

Tensions between data collection strategies and what constitutes 'forcing' are unresolved in grounded theory. What might stand as a viable means of gathering data to one grounded theorist could be defined as forcing the data into a preconceived framework by another. Glaser (1998) cautions against preconceiving 'interview guides, units for data collection, samples, received codes, following diagrams, rules for proper memoing and so forth' (p. 94). However, an open-ended interview guide to explore a topic is hardly of the same order as imposing received codes on collected data. Simply thinking through how to word open-ended questions helps novices to avoid blurting out loaded questions and to avert forcing responses into narrow categories. Researchers' inattention to methods of data collection results in forcing data in unwitting ways and likely is repeated over and over.

Reaching for Quality

The quality—and credibility—of your study starts with the data. The depth and scope of the data make a difference. A study based upon rich, substantial, and relevant data stands out. Thus, in addition to their usefulness for developing core categories, two other criteria for data are their suitability and sufficiency for depicting empirical events.

Whatever methods you choose, plan to gather sufficient data to fit your task and to give you as full a picture of the topic as possible within the parameters of this task. Readers and reviewers will see your study as a serious effort and you will have a strong foundation from which to speak. A novice may mistake good, but limited, data for an adequate study. Consider the design of the study as a whole. For example, an ethnographer who engages in detailed sustained observation and concludes the study with ten intensive interviews of key informants has far more to draw on than someone who has simply conducted ten rich interviews. What fits the requirements for an undergraduate project seldom suffices for a doctoral dissertation. Skimpy data may give you a wonderful start but do not add up to a detailed study or a nuanced grounded theory. A researcher can rarely make persuasive, much less definitive, statements from limited data.

Some grounded theorists (Glaser, 1998; Stern, 1994a) argue against attending to the amount of data. Numerous other researchers have embraced a similar stance to legitimize small studies with skimpy data. For both Glaser and Stern, small samples and limited data do not pose problems because grounded theory methods aim to develop conceptual categories and thus data collection is directed to illuminate properties of a category and relations between categories. Their reasoning can help you streamline data collection. It can also lead to what Dey (1999: 119) calls a 'smash and grab' data collection strategy and to superficial analyses.

What kind of data stands as rich and sufficient? Asking yourself the following questions may help you evaluate your data:

- Have I collected enough background data about persons, processes, and settings to have ready recall and to understand and portray the full range of contexts of the study?

- Have I gained detailed descriptions of a range of participants' views and actions?
- Do the data reveal what lies beneath the surface?
- Are the data sufficient to reveal changes over time?
- Have I gained multiple views of the participants' range of actions?
- Have I gathered data that enable me to develop analytic categories?
- What kinds of comparisons can I make between data? How do these comparisons generate and inform my ideas?

Interpretive qualitative methods mean entering research participants' worlds. Blumer's (1969) dictum to 'Respect your subjects' reminds us to preserve our participants' human dignity even if we question their perspectives or practices. One way of respecting our research participants is through trying to establish rapport with them. Dey (1999) points out that Glaser and Strauss's (1967) smash and grab data collection strategy dispenses with rapport, which for many projects is a prerequisite to gaining solid data. If researchers do not establish rapport, they risk losing access to conduct subsequent interviews or observations.

Our respect for our research participants pervades how we collect data and shapes the content of our data. We demonstrate our respect by making concerted efforts to learn about their views and actions and to try to understand their lives from their perspectives. This approach means we must test our assumptions about the worlds we study, not unwittingly reproduce these assumptions. It means discovering what our research participants take for granted or do not state as well as what they say and do. As we try to look at their world through their eyes, we offer our participants respect and, to our best ability, understanding, although we may not agree with them. We try to understand but do not necessarily adopt or reproduce their views as our own; rather we interpret them. We attempt to learn but we cannot know what occurs in people's heads (see also Murphy & Dingwall, 2003). Nonetheless, a careful interpretive understanding often marks classic qualitative studies and represents a stunning achievement (see, for example, Clark, 1997; Fine, 1986, 1998; Mitchell, 2002). Kristin Luker's (1984) book *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* exemplifies this type of interpretive understanding. She studied the views of pro-life and pro-choice women and offered respect and interest to members of both groups. She portrayed their contrasting views and provided an even-handed analysis of both groups' positions. See how Luker presents the logic of pro-life activists:

Because they were not on the whole exposed during childhood and youth to the idea that embryos belong to a different moral category than persons already born, the abortion reform movement strikes them as a sudden and capricious rejection of centuries of 'respect for unborn life.' ... For people who really do believe that embryos have always been treated with respect—and our data suggest that most all pro-life people believe this—the wide acceptance of abortion in American society is truly frightening because it seems to represent a willingness of society to strip the rights of personhood from 'persons' who have always enjoyed them. If the rights of personhood can be so easily taken away from babies (embryos), who among us will be next? (p. 156)

Gathering Grounded Theory Data

Classic grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978) emphasizes creating analyses of action and process. The grounded theory approach of simultaneous data collection and analysis helps us to keep pursuing these emphases as we shape our data collection to inform our emerging analysis. Thus, the first grounded theory question to ask follows:

- What's happening here? (Glaser, 1978)

This question spawns looking at what is happening at either of two levels:

- What are the basic social processes?
- What are the basic social psychological processes?

Such questions get you started. The answers may not be as straightforward as the questions suggest. What you define as basic is always an interpretation, even when major participants concur. Glaser and Strauss (1967; Glaser, 1978) emphasize *the* basic social process that the researcher discovers in the field. Although the classic texts present the analysis of basic social processes as fundamental to the grounded theory method, Glaser's (2002) revision disavows the pursuit of a basic social process, stating that doing so forces the data.

You may find many things happening in the setting. Everything may seem significant—or trivial. Reflect on what you are seeing and hearing. Depending on your assessment, such questions as the following may help.

- From whose point of view is a given process fundamental? From whose view is it marginal?
- How do the observed social processes emerge? How do participants' actions construct them?
- Who exerts control over these processes? Under what conditions?
- What meanings do different participants attribute to the process? How do they talk about it? What do they emphasize? What do they leave out?
- How and when do their meanings and actions concerning the process change?

These questions may be deceptive. The easy answer may slice no deeper than a paper cut—and not pierce fundamental social processes. These processes may remain unseen and unstated but shape participants' actions and understandings within the setting. Might definitions of 'the' basic social process in the setting differ according to various participants' positions and resulting vantage points? On which information and experiences do participants define the processes in which they are engaged? Do they provide an idealized picture wrapped in public relations rhetoric rather than one reflecting the realities people struggle with? When does a basic social process become visible or change? A community agency, for example, may purport to do good works for clients. Yet a close examination may reveal that the most basic process is keeping the agency solvent. Consider the following ways to construct data:

- Attending to actions and processes as well as to words
- Delineating the context, scenes, and situations of action carefully
- Recording who did what, when it occurred, why it happened (if you can ascertain the reasons), and *how* it occurred
- Identifying the *conditions* under which specific actions, intentions, and processes emerge or are muted
- Looking for ways to interpret these data
- Focusing on specific words and phrases to which participants seem to attribute particular meaning
- Finding taken-for-granted and hidden assumptions of various participants; showing how they are revealed through and affect actions.

Grounded Theory in Ethnography

Ethnography means recording the life of a particular group and thus entails sustained participation and observation in their milieu, community, or social world. It means more than participant observation alone because an ethnographic study covers the round of life occurring within the given milieu(x) and often includes supplementary data from documents, diagrams, maps, photographs, and, occasionally, formal interviews and questionnaires.

Participant observers may limit their focus to one aspect of daily life. In contrast, ethnographers seek detailed knowledge of the multiple dimensions of life within the studied milieu and aim to understand members' taken-for-granted assumptions and rules (Ashworth, 1995; Charmaz & Olesen, 1997).

What should an ethnographer study in the field? Whatever is happening there. By remaining open to the setting and the actions and people in it, ethnographers have the opportunity to work from the ground up and to pursue whatever they find to be of the greatest interest.

Research participants allow ethnographers to see their worlds and their actions within them. The goal of much ethnography is to gain an insider's depiction of the studied world. Nonetheless, like other researchers, ethnographers bring their theoretical training and methodological tools to their work. From the research participants' standpoint, the ironic outcome may be an outsider's report (Pollner & Emerson, 2001).

Although standard textbooks call for an open mind and accepting demeanor in the field, ethnographers bring divergent styles to their studies. The research problems they address, the participants they meet, and the constraints they encounter all shape their involvement. In one setting, an ethnographer may find participants eager to tell their personal and collective stories. In another, the ethnographer may remain welcome only if he or she provides a novel presence in the setting. The extent to which ethnographers move from passive observation to full participation depends on the specific study, including its objectives, agreements about access, involvement, reciprocities, and emergent relationships with members. Quite possibly, an ethnographer may become more involved in the scene than anticipated. Similarly, he or she may find this involvement to be of a

different order than expected. As a naïve ethnographer in an institutional care facility, I thought I would be able to slip back to my room and write notes at times during the day. The administrator who had given me permission to live there held quite a different view: institutional life trumped research roles. He insisted that I spend the days—and most evenings—participating in the residents' activities. He informed me, 'Everyone is a therapist here.'

What's basic in a setting depends on participants' positions, actions, and intentions. Actions may defy stated intentions. Different participants have different vantage points—and, sometimes, competing agendas. Do they realize when they hold competing agendas? How do they act on them? When, if ever, does conflict emerge?

If you happened to read fieldnotes of observations in a grounded theory project, you might find that these notes:

- Record individual and collective actions
- Contain full, detailed notes with anecdotes and observations
- Emphasize significant processes occurring in the setting
- Address what participants define as interesting and/or problematic
- Attend to participants' language use
- Place actors and actions in scenes and contexts
- Become progressively focused on key analytic ideas.

From the start, a grounded theory study takes a different form than other types of ethnographies. Grounded theory ethnography gives priority to the studied *phenomenon* or *process*—rather than to a description of a setting. Thus, from the beginnings of their fieldwork, grounded theory ethnographers study what is happening in the setting and make a *conceptual* rendering of these actions. A grounded theory ethnographer likely moves across settings to gain more knowledge of the studied process. Other ethnographic approaches often focus on topics such as kinship networks, religious practices, and the organization of work in a specific community. Subsequently, these ethnographers provide full descriptions of these topics in the studied setting and usually take a more structural than processual approach.

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To the extent that ethnographers treat their topics as separate segments of the studied world or as structures but not processes, completing a grounded theory analysis poses difficulties. Their fieldnotes may describe the topic as a thing, an object, without showing the actions and process that construct it. The ethnographer as well as the participants may take the processes for granted that construct the studied topic or structure.

On another level, consider the relative congruence between your overall research goals and the data you gather and record. Be open to what you have and where it takes you (Atkinson, 1990). Exciting new horizons may appear. Sometimes, however, you may need to expand your access within a setting. If you wish to write about how an organization processes people, you will need

to show how people move through the organization—or are moved through it. Organizational spatial allocations and arrangements may provide telling data. For example, if you want to know when, how, and why staff in a retirement facility assign and reassign residents to spatial areas with different levels of care, you need to do more than discover how residents use social areas such as the television lounge. Certainly residents' use of the lounge may yield telling observations about certain constraints due to the physical setting but provides no information on staff decisions about levels of care.

A potential problem with ethnographic studies is seeing data everywhere and nowhere, gathering everything and nothing. The studied world seems so interesting (and probably is) that the ethnographer tries to master knowing it all. Mountains of unconnected data grow (see also Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) but they do not say much. What follows? Low level description and, if a bit more sophisticated, lists of unintegrated categories. Ethnographers who leave data undigested seldom produce fresh insights and, sometimes, may not even complete their projects, despite years of toil.

Enter grounded theory. Paradoxically, concentrating on a basic social process can help you to gain a more complete picture of the *whole* setting than the former approach common in earlier ethnographic work. Ethnographers can make connections between events by using grounded theory to study processes. A grounded theory emphasis on comparative method leads ethnographers 1) to compare data with data from the *beginning* of the research, not after all the data are collected, 2) to compare data with emerging categories, and 3) to demonstrate relations between concepts and categories. Grounded theory strategies can increase ethnographers' involvement in their *research inquiry*, despite pressures they might face to be full participants in their research settings. In this sense, grounded theory dispels the positivist notion of passive observers who merely absorb their surrounding scenes. Grounded theorists select the scenes they observe and direct their gaze within them. If used with care and thoroughness, grounded theory methods provide systematic guidelines for probing beneath the surface and digging into the scene. These methods help in maintaining control over the research process because they assist the ethnographer in focusing, structuring, and organizing it.

Grounded theory methods move ethnographic research toward theoretical development by raising description to abstract categories and theoretical interpretation. In the past, ethnography suffered from a rigid and artificial separation of data collection and analysis. Grounded theory methods preserve an open-ended approach to studying the empirical world yet add rigor to ethnographic research by building systematic checks into both data collection and analysis. The logic of grounded theory entails going back to data and forward into analysis. Subsequently you return to the field to gather further data and to refine the emerging theoretical framework. This logic aids you in overcoming several ethnographic problems: 1) accusations of uncritically adopting research participants' views, 2) lengthy unfocused forays into the field setting, 3) superficial, random data collection, and 4) reliance on stock disciplinary categories.

Thin, unfocused data may tempt ethnographers to fall back on lifting stock concepts from their disciplinary shelves. Grounded theory prompts taking a

fresh look and creating novel categories and concepts. That is the strength and the core of the method. Moving back and forth between data and analysis also helps you from feeling overwhelmed and to avoid procrastinating (see also, Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Both can happen when researchers collect data without direction.

Current trends toward limited data and 'instant' theorizing³ have long been associated with grounded theory and now permeate other methods, including ethnography. A competent ethnographic study demands time and commitment. Grounded theory can help you trim excess work but the core tasks still need to be done. Gathering rich ethnographic data means starting by engaging the studied phenomena—get involved!

You can make the most of what you bring to the setting. Novices often bring energy and openness. Some experienced ethnographers may be so imbued with disciplinary ideas and procedures that they have difficulty moving beyond them. Other experienced ethnographers sense areas to pursue without articulating them and, moreover, without being wedded to them. Novices may flounder. A few guidelines can turn floundering into flourishing. Mitchell (in Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) has found that student ethnographers flourish with a little help. He asks students to study actions and actors and provides the questions below to spark their thinking. You may find several questions that help you to view the events in your research setting. If so, adopt them, but follow what you observe in the setting first. We can use Mitchell's questions to initiate inquiry, not to substitute a formula for it.

- What is the setting of action? When and how does action take place?
 - What is going on? What is the overall activity being studied, the relatively long-term behavior about which participants organize themselves? What specific acts comprise this activity?
 - What is the distribution of participants over space and time in these locales?
 - How are actors [research participants] organized? What organizations effect, oversee, regulate or promote this activity?
 - How are members stratified? Who is ostensibly in charge? Does being in charge vary by activity? How is membership achieved and maintained?
 - What do actors pay attention to? What is important, preoccupying, critical?
 - What do they pointedly ignore that other persons might pay attention to?
 - What symbols do actors invoke to understand their worlds, the participants and processes within them, and the objects and events they encounter? What names do they attach to objects, events, persons, roles, settings, equipment?
 - What practices, skills, strategems, methods of operation do actors employ?
 - Which theories, motives, excuses, justifications or other explanations do actors use in accounting for their participation? How do they explain to each other, not to outside investigators, what they do and why they do it?
 - What goals do actors seek? When, from their perspective, is an act well or poorly done? How do they judge action—by what standards, developed and applied by whom?
 - What rewards do various actors gain from their participation?⁴
- (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 163)

An ethnographer may invoke such questions when learning about context and content, meaning and action, structures and actors. Grounded theory can expedite ethnographers' delving into problematic topics that emerge in the field. A grounded theory strategy: Seek data, describe observed events, answer fundamental questions about what is happening, then develop theoretical categories to understand it. This approach also remedies weaknesses in grounded theory studies, especially those that rely on single accounts given to field investigators. How people explain their actions to each other may not resemble their statements to an interviewer. Moreover, participants' most important explanations may consist of tacit understandings. If so, then participants seldom articulate them out loud among themselves, let alone to non-members.

Understanding derives most directly from the immediacy of our participation in social actors' shared worlds (Prus, 1996). In practical terms, this means the researcher needs to share some experiences, but not necessarily all viewpoints, with those being studied. Bergson states, 'Philosophers agree in making a deep distinction between two ways of knowing a thing. The first implies going all around it, the second entering into it' (Bergson, 1903: 1). The ethnographer's job is to explore the second way. Grounded theory studies often move around an object; these methods generate a map of the object of study from the outside, but may not enter it. Such studies may look at phenomena from a variety of locations and standpoints (see, for example, Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1968). Yet grounded theory ethnographers can go deep into experience to make an interpretive rendering (see, for example, Baszanger, 1998; Casper, 1998; Timmermans, 1999).

Intensive Interviewing

The Interview Conversation

Intensive interviewing has long been a useful data-gathering method in various types of qualitative research. Most essentially, an interview is a directed conversation (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, 1995); intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and, thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry. Other forms of interviewing, such as informational interviewing, might be indicated for certain grounded theory projects, particularly those with an objectivist cast (but see Hermes, 1995).

The in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant's interpretation of his or her experience. The interviewer seeks to understand the topic and the interview participant has the relevant experiences to shed light on it (see Fontana & Frey, 1994; Seidman, 1997). Thus, the interviewer's questions ask the participant to describe and reflect upon his or her experiences in ways that seldom occur in everyday life. The interviewer is there to listen, to observe with sensitivity, and to encourage

An interview is a directed conversation (Lofland & Lofland, 1984, 1995); an intensive interview permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic with a person who has had the relevant experiences.

the person to respond. Hence, in this conversation, the participant does most of the talking.

For a grounded theory study, devise a few broad, open-ended questions. Then you can focus your interview questions to invite detailed discussion of topic. By creating open-ended, non-judgmental questions, you encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge. The combination of how you construct the questions and conduct the interview shapes how well you achieve a balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements.

The structure of an intensive interview may range from a loosely guided exploration of topics to semi-structured focused questions. Although the intensive interview may be conversational, it follows a different etiquette. The researcher should express interest and want to know more. What might be rude to ask or be glossed over in friendly agreement in ordinary conversation—even with intimates—becomes grist for exploration. Research participants often expect their interviewers to ask questions that invite reflections about the topic. Rather than uttering ‘uh huhs’ or just nodding as if meanings are automatically shared, an interviewer might say, ‘That’s interesting, tell me more about it.’ In your role as an interviewer, your comments and questions help the research participant to articulate his or her intentions and meanings. As the interview proceeds, you may request clarifying details to obtain accurate information and to learn about the research participant’s experiences and reflections. Unlike ordinary conversation, an interviewer can shift the conversation and follow hunches. An interview goes beneath the surface of ordinary conversation and examines earlier events, views, and feelings afresh.

Intensive interviews allow an interviewer to:

- Go beneath the surface of the described experience(s)
- Stop to explore a statement or topic
- Request more detail or explanation
- Ask about the participant’s thoughts, feelings, and actions
- Keep the participant on the subject
- Come back to an earlier point
- Restate the participant’s point to check for accuracy
- Slow or quicken the pace
- Shift the immediate topic
- Validate the participant’s humanity, perspective, or action
- Use observational and social skills to further the discussion
- Respect the participant and express appreciation for participating.

Now compare these interviewing entitlements to disclosures in ordinary life. Conversational rules may dictate that you listen, not ask for clarification, agree with the speaker—at least tacitly—but not question, let the speaker direct conversational flow, rather than stop it to explore an earlier point, and hear a story but not repeat it in your words to recapture the other person’s. Think about what ensues after a friend has shared a long story with you. Can you imagine saying to her, ‘Let’s see if I have grasped these events correctly,’ followed by your portrayal of each twist and turn in her story.

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A research participant also has conversational prerogatives in the interview. Intensive interviews allow research participants to:

- Break silences and express their views
- Tell their stories and to give them a coherent frame
- Reflect on earlier events
- Be experts
- Choose what to tell and how to tell it
- Share significant experiences and teach the interviewer how to interpret them
- Express thoughts and feelings disallowed in other relationships and settings
- Receive affirmation and understanding.

Negotiations During the Interview

An interview is contextual and negotiated. Whether participants recount their concerns without interruption or researchers request specific information, the result is a construction—or reconstruction—of a reality. Interview stories do not reproduce prior realities (Murphy & Dingwall, 2003; Silverman, 2000). Rather these stories provide accounts from particular points of view that serve specific purposes, including assumptions that one should follow tacit conversational rules during the interview.

Neutral questions do not mean a neutral interview. Instead an interview reflects what interviewers and participants bring to the interview, impressions during it, and the relationship constructed through it. Interviewers must remain attuned to how participants perceive them, and how both participants' and interviewers' past and immediate identities may influence the character and content of interaction. The past as well as the present informs participants' tacit questions and negotiations about the interview process and discussion during it. Research participants appraise the interviewer, assess the situation, and act on their present assessments and prior knowledge, often in taken-for-granted ways. People who have experienced crises may seek direction from their interviewer about what to say and how deep to go. Interviewers learn how deep to go and when to explore a point further with probes as they become sensitive to their participants' concerns and vulnerabilities.

Relative differences in power and status may be acted on and played out during an interview. Powerful people may take charge, turn the interview questions to address topics on their own terms, and control the timing, pacing and length of the interview. Both powerful and disempowered individuals may distrust their interviewers, the sponsoring institutions, and the stated purpose of the research, as well as how the findings might be used. During interviews, professionals may recite public relations rhetoric rather than reveal personal views, much less a full account of their experiences. Clients may raise silent or overt questions about whether the interviewer represents officials or advocates—and test his or her loyalties.

In addition to the dynamics of power and professional status, gender, race, and age may affect the direction and content of interviews. Men may view intensive interviews as threatening because they occur within a one-to-one relationship, render control of interaction ambiguous, foster self-disclosure and, therefore, risk loss of public persona (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2002). Men's potential discomfort

may heighten, should the topic of the interview such as disability or divorce challenge their masculinity claims. While studying divorced fathers, Terry Arendell (1997) observed a subtle shift in emphasis from the focus on divorce during certain interviews. When these fathers revealed a major concern with their identities as men, their interview statements took on a meta-discourse about masculinity. Men who hide their emotions behind a thick wall of impression management may not agree to be interviewed; others may weave around questions rather than address them directly. As Arendell discovered, some men enact and dramatize gendered relations during the interview.

Interviewing women poses other dilemmas. When the interviewer is a man, gender dynamics may enter the interview. When the interviewer and participant are both women, class, age, and/or race and ethnic differences may still influence how the interview proceeds. Nonetheless, women from diverse backgrounds often volunteer to be interviewed for a variety of sensitive topics. The quality of women's responses may range widely when other people had silenced them about the interview topic. Their responses to the interview may range from illuminating, cathartic, or revelatory to uncomfortable, painful, or overwhelming. The topic, its meaning, and the circumstances of the participant's life, as well as the interviewer's skills, affect how women experience their respective interviews (see also Reinharz & Chase, 2001).

As implied above, differences between interviewer and research respondent in race, class, gender, age, and ideologies may affect what happens during the interview. These status attributes should be seen in relation to the interview topic. Male participants often prefer to talk with a woman about private experiences but may enjoy teaching a younger male interviewer about their work lives. Similarly, elderly participants might be quite willing to discuss sexuality in late life with a middle-aged or older interviewer but not with a young person.

Consider how you can best use the flexibility of interviewing. Grounded theory methods encourage using both ethnographic and interviewing approaches. You may start observing to study a topic and as your analysis proceeds return to participants with more focused queries.

Fitting Intensive Interviewing with Grounded Theory

Intensive qualitative interviewing fits grounded theory methods particularly well. Both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted. Although researchers often choose intensive interviewing as a single method, it complements other methods such as observations, surveys, and research participants' written accounts.

An interviewer assumes more direct control over the construction of data than most other methods such as ethnography or textual analysis. Grounded theory methods require that researchers take control of their data collection and analysis, and in turn these methods give researchers more analytic control over their material. Qualitative interviewing

Both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing are open-ended but directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet flexible approaches.

provides an open-ended, in-depth exploration of an aspect of life about which the interviewee has substantial experience, often combined with considerable insight. The interview can elicit views of this person's subjective world. Interviewers sketch the outline of these views by delineating the topics and drafting the questions. Interviewing is a flexible, emergent technique; ideas and issues emerge during the interview and interviewers can immediately pursue these leads.

Grounded theory methods depend upon a similar type of flexibility as in-depth interviewing. As grounded theorists we aim to learn what is happening from the beginning of our research. Our attempts to learn help us to correct tendencies to follow preconceived notions about what is happening in the field. In addition to picking up and pursuing themes in interviews, we look for ideas through studying our data and then return to the field and gather focused data to answer analytic questions and to fill conceptual gaps. Thus, the combination of flexibility and control inherent in in-depth interviewing techniques fit grounded theory strategies for increasing the analytic incisiveness of the resultant analysis. Grounded theory interviewing differs from much in-depth interviewing because we narrow the range of interview topics to gather specific data for developing our theoretical frameworks as we proceed with conducting the interviews.

Conducting Interviews

How might you go about doing an interview for a grounded theory study? Your first question may suffice for the whole interview if stories tumble out. Receptive 'uh huhs,' a few clarifying questions or comments may keep a story coming when a participant can and wants to tell it. I choose questions carefully and ask them slowly to foster the participant's reflections. Interviewers use in-depth interviewing to explore, not to interrogate (Charmaz, 1991b). Framing questions takes skill and practice. Questions must explore the interviewer's topic and fit the participant's experience. As evident below, these kinds of questions are sufficiently general to cover a wide range of experiences and narrow enough to elicit and elaborate the participant's specific experience.

I include sample questions below to give you ideas about how to frame questions to study process. These questions also reflect a symbolic interactionist emphasis on learning about participants' views, experienced events, and actions. The sample questions are intended to study individual experience. For a project concerning organizational or social processes, I direct questions to the collective practices first and, later, attend to the individual's participation in them and views of them.

These sample questions are merely examples to consider. Think about them and write some open-ended questions. Trim your list of questions to as few as possible. I have never asked all the questions below and often don't get beyond an initial set of questions in one session. I seldom take an interview guide with me into the interview. I prefer to keep the interview informal and conversational; however, novices need more structure. Having an interview guide with well-planned open-ended questions and ready probes can increase your confidence and permit you to concentrate on what the person is saying. Otherwise you may miss obvious points to explore because you become distracted by

what to ask next and how to ask it. Subsequently, you may ask a series of 'do you' questions that cut off exploring the topic. At worst, your line of questioning can slip into an interrogation. Both defeat the purpose of conducting an intensive interview. Interviewing takes skill, but you can learn how to do it.

Just as you may need to give special consideration to interviewing certain participants, many topics require special attention. Studying life disruptions or stigmatized behaviors may raise questions of being intrusive. Participants sometimes tell painful stories during the interview that they never imagined telling that may or may not pertain to your study. I follow several principles in such cases that may help you. First, I assume that participants' comfort level has higher priority than obtaining juicy data. Second, I pay close attention as to when to probe. Often, I just listen, particularly when the participant appears to be reexperiencing feelings in the described incident. Third, I try to understand the experience from the participant's view and to validate its significance to this person. Fourth, I slant ending questions toward positive responses to bring the interview to closure at a positive level. No interview should end abruptly after an interviewer has asked the most searching questions or when the participant is distressed. The rhythm and pace of the interview should bring the participant back to a normal conversational level before ending. The following sample interview questions illustrate the above points.

Increasingly, institutional review boards (IRBs) and human subjects committees demand that researchers submit detailed descriptions of their research plans and complete instruments for review. Such detail is inconsistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research in general and grounded theory methods in particular. Interview questions pose special problems in seeking approval from IRBs and human subjects committees. Proposed interview questions must be sufficiently detailed to convince evaluators that no harm will befall research participants yet open enough to allow unanticipated material to emerge during the interview. A well-thought-out list of open-ended questions helps.

BOX 2.1 A SAMPLE OF GROUNDED THEORY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ABOUT A LIFE CHANGE

Initial Open-ended Questions

1. Tell me about what happened [or how you came to —].
2. When, if at all, did you first experience — [or notice —]?
3. [If so,] what was it like? What did you think then? How did you happen to —? Who, if anyone, influenced your actions? Tell me about how he/she or they influenced you.
4. Could you describe the events that led up to — [or preceded —]?
5. What contributed to —?
6. What was going on in your life then? How would you describe how you viewed — before — happened? How, if at all, has your view of — changed?
7. How would you describe the person you were then?

(Continued)

(Continued)

Intermediate Questions

1. What, if anything, did you know about ____?
2. Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you learned about ____.
3. What happened next?
4. Who, if anyone, was involved? When was that? How were they involved?
5. Tell me about how you learned to handle ____.
6. How, if at all, have your thoughts and feelings about ____ changed since ____?
7. What positive changes have occurred in your life [or ____] since ____?
8. What negative changes, if any, have occurred in your life [or ____] since ____?
9. Tell me how you go about ____ . What do you do?
10. Could you describe a typical day for you when you are ____? [Probe for different times.] Now tell me about a typical day when you are ____.
11. Tell me how you would describe the person you are now. What most contributed to this change [or continuity]?
12. As you look back on ____, are there any other events that stand out in your mind? Could you describe [each one] it? How did this event affect what happened? How did you respond to ____ [the event; the resulting situations]?
13. Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing ____?
14. Where do you see yourself in two years [five years, ten years as appropriate]? Describe the person you hope to be then. How would you compare the person you hope to be and the person you see yourself as now?
15. What helps you to manage ____? What problems might you encounter? Tell me the sources of these problems.
16. Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?
17. Has any organization been helpful? What did ____ help you with? How has it been helpful?

Ending Questions

1. What do you think are the most important ways to ____? How did you discover [or create] them? How has your experience before ____ affected how you handled ____?
2. Tell me about how your views [and/or actions depending on topic and preceding responses] may have changed since you have ____.
3. How have you grown as a person since ____? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed through ____ . [If appropriate] What do you most value about yourself now? What do others most value in you?
4. After having these experiences, what advice would you give to someone who has just discovered that he or she ____?
5. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
6. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand ____ better?
7. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

The questions in Box 2.1 overlap—intentionally so. They permit you to go back to an earlier thread to gain more information, or to winnow unnecessary or potentially uncomfortable questions. Using a tape recorder allows you to give full attention to your research participant with steady eye contact and gives you detailed data. Taking notes on key points during the interview helps as long as jotting notes does not distract you or your participant. Your notes remind you to return to earlier points and suggest how to frame your follow-up questions.

We must guard against forcing interview data into preconceived categories (Glaser, 1978). Interviewing challenges us to create a balance between asking significant questions and forcing responses—more so than other forms of qualitative data collection. An interviewer's questions and interviewing style shape the context, frame, and content of the study. Subsequently, a naïve researcher may inadvertently force interview data into preconceived categories. Not only can asking the wrong questions result in forcing the data, but also how interviewers pose, emphasize, and pace their questions can force the data. The wrong questions fail to explore pivotal issues or to elicit participants' experiences in their own language. Such questions may also impose the researcher's concepts, concerns, and discourse upon the research participant's reality—from the start. Transcribed, tape-recorded interviews make it easy to see when your questions don't work or force the data. When irrelevant, superficial, or forced questions shape the data collection, the subsequent analysis suffers. Thus, researchers need to be constantly reflexive about the nature of their questions and whether they work for the specific participants and the nascent grounded theory.

The focus of the interview and the specific questions asked likely differs depending on whether the interviewer adopts a more constructivist, or more objectivist approach. A constructivist would emphasize eliciting the participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules. An objectivist would be concerned with obtaining information about chronology, events, settings, and behaviors. Then, too, Glaser's (1978) version of grounded theory would produce different questions than Strauss and Corbin's (1990, 1998) approach.

On a more general level, we all need to be aware of the assumptions and perspectives that we import into our interview questions. Consider the following questions:

- 'Tell me about the stressors in your situation.'
- 'What coping techniques do you use to handle these stressors?'

These questions might work with a sample of research participants, such as nurses, for whom the terms 'stressors' and 'coping techniques' are common parlance, as long as the interviewer asked participants to define these terms at some point. However, the term 'stressors' might be alien to other participants, such as elderly nursing home patients, much less the thought of identifying sources of stress and having explicit techniques for dealing with them. Paying attention to participants' language, meanings, and lives is crucial here.

Like other skilled interviewers, grounded theory interviewers must remain active in the interview and alert to interesting leads (see Gorden, 1987;

Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 1998 for suggestions). Sound interview strategies help the researcher go beyond common sense tales and subsequent obvious, low-level categories that add nothing new. Any competent interviewer shapes questions to obtain rich material and, simultaneously, avoids imposing preconceived concepts on it. Keeping the questions open-ended helps enormously. When participants use terms from the lexicon of their experience, such as 'good days' and 'bad days,' the interviewer can ask for more detail. Contrast the difference between these questions:

- 'Tell me what a good day is like for you.'
- 'Do you feel better about yourself on a good day?'

The first question leaves the response open to the participant's experience and conceptions. This question invites the participant to frame and explore his or her views of a good day. The second closes down the discussion and relegates the answer to a 'yes' or 'no.' This question also assumes both the definitional frame and that participant and interviewer share it.

Interview questions that allow the participant to reflect anew on phenomena elicit rich data. 'Tell me about,' 'how,' 'what,' and 'when' questions yield rich data, particularly when you buttress them with queries to elaborate or to specify such as 'Could you describe—further' (see Charmaz, 2002a). Look for the 'ums' and 'you know's' and then explore what they indicate. What do long pauses indicate? How might they reflect a struggle to find words? When might a 'you know' signal taken-for-granted meanings? When might 'you know' seek the interviewer's concurrence or suggest that the respondent is struggling to articulate an experience? In my research, however, respondents' stories about illness often spilled out non-stop. For example, one participant who had multiple sclerosis said,

There's always the bladder infection. It seems like, you know, there for—in the nursing home there wasn't [a bladder infection]. There were two or three years [without them]. When I came out [from the nursing home] it seems like that's all I deal with—bladder infections ... So I just cleared bladder infection. It was stressful and it's been a year of that bladder infection, and I probably have another one and this has just been a week and a half. So I could always tell with my back pain and the way I sleep and—and with every bladder infection, the medicines, they kill the good bacteria too. So you get a yeast infection and it's like you just live round-the-clock [with illness and care] and it's—and that's—if all I have to deal with that's one thing, but I have the stress of my—my family. And that's taken a real toll. And then my bowels don't work. This bladder medicine gives you diarrhea. (Charmaz, 1991a: 73)

A researcher has topics to pursue. Research participants have problems to solve, goals to pursue, and actions to perform, and they hold assumptions, ideas, and feelings about all these concerns. Your research questions and mode of inquiry shape your subsequent data and analysis. Thus, becoming self-aware about why and how you gather data enables you to assess your effectiveness. You learn to sense when you are gathering rich, useful data that do not undermine

or demean your respondent(s). Not surprisingly then, grounded theory methods work best when the grounded theorist engages in data collection as well as data analysis. This way, you can explore nuances of meaning and process that hired hands might easily miss.

Respondents' stories may tumble out or the major process in which people are engaged may jump out at you. However, respondents may not be so forthcoming nor may major processes be so obvious. Even if they are, it usually takes considerable work to discover the subtlety and complexity of respondents' intentions and actions. The researcher may have entered the implicit world of meaning, but not of explicit words. For example, some of my participants spoke of incidents in which they told other people about their illnesses. They described these people as being initially sympathetic, but later they sensed that they were being treated with insincerity, and felt their social and personal worth was undermined. Often the meaning of such incidents showed in the emotions they expressed when retelling the events, more than in the words they chose.

The researcher may have entered the implicit world of meaning, but not of explicit words.

For some topics, closer study and direct questioning may suffice. For other topics, you may need to redirect inquiry. For example, our language contains few words with which to talk about time. Thus, many of my research participants' attitudes toward and actions concerning time remained unspoken and taken for granted. Yet their stories about illness often depended on conceptions of time and referred to implicit qualities of experienced time. For example, the woman's statement above about bladder infections referred to the speed and unevenness of her days. When you plan to explore such areas, then you try to devise ways to make relevant observations or to construct questions that will foster pertinent responses. To illustrate, I asked my respondents questions like, 'As you look back on your illness, which events stand out in your mind?' 'What is a typical weekday like for you?' Glaser (1992) might say I force the data here by asking preconceived questions of it. Instead, I *generate* data by investigating taken-for-granted aspects of life. At whatever level you attend to your participants' meanings, intentions, and actions, you can create a coherent analysis by using grounded theory methods. Hence, the method is useful for fact-finding descriptive studies as well as more conceptually developed theoretical statements.

Studying your data prompts you to learn nuances of your research participants' language and meanings.

Studying your data prompts you to learn nuances of your research participants' language and meanings. Subsequently, you learn to define the directions where your data can take you. Through studying interview audiotapes, for example, you attend closely to your respondents' feelings and views. They will live in your mind as you listen carefully over and over to what they were saying. For example, one student in my class remarked:

What an impact the words had on me when I sat home alone transcribing the tapes. I was more able to hear and feel what these women were

saying to me. I realized how, at times, I was preoccupied with thoughts of what my next question was, how my eye contact was, or hoping we were speaking loud enough for the tape-recorder. (Charmaz, 1991b: 393)

If you attend to respondents' language, you can bridge their experience with your research questions. Then you can learn about their meanings rather than make assumptions about what they mean. For example, when my respondents with chronic illnesses talked about having 'good days' and 'bad days,' I probed further and asked more questions around their taken-for-granted meanings of good and bad days. I asked questions such as: 'What is a good day like?' 'Could you describe what a bad day is?' 'What kinds of things do you do on a good day?' 'How do these activities compare with those on a bad day?' I discovered that good days mean 'minimal intrusiveness of illness, maximal control over mind, body, and actions, and greater choice of activities' (Charmaz, 1991a: 50). The meaning of good days also extends to increased temporal and spatial horizons, to the quality of the day and to realizing the self one wishes to be. But had I not followed up and asked respondents about the meanings of these terms, their specific properties would have remained implicit. Thus, I gained a more textured, dense understanding of how time and self were related.

Textual Analysis

All qualitative research entails analyzing texts; however, some researchers study texts that they only partially shape or that they obtain from other sources. Elicited texts involve research participants in producing written data in response to a researcher's request and thus offer a means of generating data. Extant texts consist of varied documents that the researcher had no hand in shaping. Researchers treat extant texts *as* data to address their research questions although these texts were produced for other—often very different—purposes. Archival data such as letters from a historical figure or era are a major source of extant texts. We may use elicited and extant texts as either primary or supplementary sources of data.

Texts do not stand as objective facts although they often represent what their authors assumed were objective facts (Prior, 2003). People construct texts for specific purposes and they do so within social, economic, historical, cultural, and situational contexts. Texts draw on particular discourses and provide accounts that record, explore, explain, justify, or foretell actions, whether the specific texts are elicited or extant. For example, police officers may record and give traffic tickets for certain violations but not those that they deem to be trivial. Their recordings are aimed to fulfill their official roles, not to serve as research data. As a discourse, a text follows certain conventions and assumes embedded meanings. Researchers can compare the style, contents, direction, and presentation of material to a larger discourse of which the text is a part. As accounts, texts tell something of intent and have intended—and perhaps unintended—audiences.

Elicited Texts

Elicited texts involve research participants in writing the data. A mailed questionnaire or, increasingly, Internet surveys containing open-ended questions are common sources of these texts. In addition, ethnographers and interviewers may ask their participants to write texts. Asking participants to record family or work histories, keep personal diaries, write daily logs, or answer written questions all generate elicited texts. These texts, like published autobiographies, may elicit thoughts, feelings, and concerns of the thinking, acting subject as well as give researchers ideas about what structures and cultural values influence the person. Researchers' guidelines for elicited texts may range from detailed instructions to minimal suggestions.

On a social psychological level, contrasts between elicited written documents and direct observations may tell a poignant tale. For example, when conducting an ethnographic study of a residential care setting, I asked members to log what they did on a Wednesday and on a Sunday to gain more knowledge of their views of typical days in the institution. After I collected the residents' logs of their typical days, I discovered that one woman had recorded a packed schedule of her reading and writing pursuits. Yet I had seen that she had slept during most of these periods. While engaged in a conversation with a staff nurse, I discovered that this woman had recorded her typical day of three years before (Calkins, 1970). Once a published writer, she wished to be identified by her past, not her present. If I had not collected the logs, I might have missed learning how some elders and ill people construct fictional identities in the present that they reconstruct from actual identities in the past. These identities reflect meanings and preferred images of self, not outright lies. In a similar way, interview respondents may wish to appear affable, intelligent, or politically correct and thus shape their responses accordingly. However, interviews pose possibilities for checking a story that a text does not.

In the example above, my sustained presence in the setting allowed me to search for reasons for disparities between observed realities and written responses. When elicited texts are written by anonymous authors, the researcher has no means of comparing them with other data about the same people.

Elicited texts such as logs, journals, diaries or written responses to specific questions share some of the advantages and disadvantages of conventional surveys and interviews. Like questionnaires, anonymous elicited texts can foster frank disclosures that a person might not wish to make to an interviewer. Revealing secrets that risk shame, disgrace, or failure are among these disclosures. Research participants may not wish to discuss their genetic histories, sex lives, financial situations, troubles at work, personal failures, feelings, or unfulfilled hopes and dreams but might be willing to write about them anonymously. Participants can tell as much or little about themselves as they wish. Still, this approach relies on participants' prior writing skills and practices. Not all participants possess the skill, comfort, and confidence to write full accounts. Murphy and Dingwall (2003) state that elicited texts generate data that resemble interview data. True—they do when the questions posed resemble interview questions and the participants respond to them as such, rather than as bureaucratic forms, quick surveys, management ploys, or trivial inquiries. Thus,

elicited texts work best when participants have a stake in the addressed topics, experience in the relevant areas, and view the questions as significant.

As in questionnaire construction, researchers who use elicited texts cannot modify or reword a question once they ask it. Nor do they have any immediate possibility of following up on a statement, encouraging a response, or raising a question even when they may be able to interview research participants later. If consistent with earlier entry and access agreements, researchers might talk with known participants further about their written responses. Although having access to multiple forms of data strengthens a study, qualitative researchers increasingly use personal accounts, letters, responses to open-ended questionnaires, and media resources without other forms of data collection and without the possibility of pursuing such data collection.

Extant Texts

Extant texts contrast with elicited texts in that the researcher does not affect their construction. Among those we might use are public records, government reports, organizational documents, mass media, literature, autobiographies, personal correspondence, Internet discussions, and earlier qualitative materials from data banks. In the past, researchers have valued extant texts because of their relative availability, typically unobtrusive method of data collection, and seeming objectivity.⁵

When researchers use extant texts, their readers may believe such texts mirror reality. A corporate annual report, data on the distribution of homelessness in your hometown, US census data on race may all look like reports of 'facts.' Yet they reflect shared definitions concerning each topic and the power to enforce these definitions. Report writers may adopt definitions that alter or contradict their readers' meanings of seemingly concrete categories such as profits and losses.

Extant texts such as medical charts, police records, or school policy statements may all provide useful information and all have serious limitations. For example, health care workers who foresee possible litigation may limit their notes in medical charts. While working as a nursing assistant during his ethnographic study of a nursing home, Timothy Diamond (1992) examined patients' medical charts. He discovered that staff notes not only erased prior uncharted events but also that the caring work of nursing assistants remained invisible. Through his field research, Diamond learned what staff charted, how they used charts, and what they left out.

Exploring the purposes and objectives of records allows placing them into perspective and perhaps seeking more data from other sources. Extant texts can complement ethnographic and interview methods. Answering questions about information in these texts can serve as valuable data:

- What are the parameters of the information?
- On what and whose facts does this information rest?
- What does the information mean to various participants or actors in the scene?
- What does the information leave out?

- Who has access to the facts, records, or sources of the information?
- Who is the intended audience for the information?
- Who benefits from shaping and/or interpreting this information in a particular way?
- How, if at all, does the information affect actions?

Pretend that you had collected all the reports in an organization you were studying. You might find sharp differences between organizational reports and the field observations that you made. For example, you might discover that managers redefine their failed projects and tout them as successes in their yearly reports. Such important data could direct your analysis in pivotal ways.

For some projects, extant texts provide an independent source of data from the researcher's collected first-hand materials (Reinharz, 1992). Many qualitative researchers make use of demographic data as a backdrop for their topics. Some explore the weaknesses of such data to frame their arguments. Others look for earlier materials that can inform their research questions. I drew upon written personal accounts, primarily published autobiographies, of their respective authors' experience with chronic illness. Rather than assuming such texts are objective sources of data, uncontaminated by the researcher, you can treat them analytically as another source of data. These texts may also spark your ideas and provide evidence for your hunches. Occasionally, you may come across a text that provides strong evidence for an analytic point long after you have drafted it. After I had developed my category 'recapturing the past' I happened to read Kathleen Lewis's (1985) poignant account of having lupus erythematosus. Her statement supported my category:

My family and I kept taking the 'old me' off the shelf, hoping one day she might return and we could go back to our past lives. We'd sigh and put her back on the shelf, but she lingered in our memories and hopes, thwarting any attempts of accepting and living in the present as it was. It was always, 'Tomorrow we'll ...' or 'Remember yesterday, when ...?' (p. 45)

Qualitative researchers often use texts as supplementary sources of data. Ethnographers rely most heavily on their fieldnotes but make use of newsletters, records, and reports when they can obtain them. Comparisons between fieldnotes and written documents can spark insights about the relative congruence—or lack of it—between words and deeds. Ethnographers observe what is happening in the setting and learn about the local culture. Both organizational rhetoric and reports may pale in the face of observed worlds. These texts may fulfill intriguing organizational purposes, but researchers cannot assume that they mirror organizational processes. Thus, such texts may provide useful statements about an organization's professed images and claimed objectives—the front stage view aimed to shape its public reputation. When significant audiences accept these statements, the organization can shield backstage realities and often more fundamental objectives from scrutiny, such as recruitment of new members or organizational survival or dominance.

Studying Texts

To the extent possible, we need to situate texts in their contexts. Now Internet research offers endless opportunities for textual analysis—and poses enormous methodological issues. Texts without contexts are major among them. Where do the data come from? Who participated in shaping them? What did the authors intend? Have participants provided sufficient information for us to make a plausible interpretation? And do we have sufficient knowledge of the relevant worlds to read their words with any understanding? On the Internet, participants may alter what we define as basic information—age, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class origins—as well as the specific content of their responses.

Much textual analysis is without context, or worse, out of context. How do you place texts into context? Providing description of the times, actors, and issues gives you a start. Multiple methods help, such as interviewing key participants, and using several types of documents also helps. Texts that tell the story behind other texts at least suggest the social context for the analysis. Both the detail of the texts themselves and the thoroughness of the analysis figure here. Cynthia Bogard (2001) drew upon the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* stories about local homelessness as well as archival data, television reports, and scholarly publications to reconstruct a view of the context surrounding homelessness in New York and Washington and the kind of claims-making about homelessness that occurred in each city. Rather than treating newspaper reports as objective historical records, she viewed them as ‘dominant and elite voices in the public conversation about a social problem ... [and thus] important sites of reality construction’ (2001: 431). Bogard not only emphasized advocates and adversaries’ claims but also developed an analysis of the emergent contexts in which these claims occurred. The depth and comprehensiveness of Bogard’s scrutiny of these texts furthers our understanding of homelessness and of how people make claims about reality.

A major way of using texts is as objects for analytic scrutiny themselves rather than for corroborating evidence. Archival records and written narratives, video and photographic images, Internet posts and graphics may give you insights into perspectives, practices, and events not easily obtained through other qualitative methods. Nonetheless, all these texts are products. The processes that shape them may be ambiguous, invisible, and, perhaps, unknowable. A close investigation of the text helps you to study it. Among the possible ways to approach a text, these questions may arise:

- How was the text produced? By whom?
- What is the ostensible purpose of the text? Might the text serve other unstated or assumed purposes? Which ones?
- How does the text represent what its author(s) assumed to exist? Which meanings are embedded within it? How do those meanings reflect a particular social, historical, and perhaps organizational context?
- What is the structure of the text?
- How does its structure shape what is said? Which categories can you discern in its structure? What can you glean from these categories? Do the categories change in sequential texts over time? How so?

- Which contextual meanings does the text imply?
- How does its content construct images of reality?
- Which realities does the text claim to represent? How does it represent them?
- What, if any, unintended information and meanings might you see in the text?
- How is language used?
- Which rules govern the construction of the text? How can you discern them in the narrative? How do these rules reflect both tacit assumptions and explicit meanings? How might they be related to other data on the same topic?
- When and how do telling points emerge in the text?
- What kinds of comparisons can you make between texts? Between different texts on the same topic? Similar texts at different times such as organizational annual reports? Between different authors who address the same questions?
- Who benefits from the text? Why?

Most grounded theorists would start with the content of the texts. I also address their structure and relationships between structure and content. Grounded theories of textual material can address form as well as content, audiences as well as authors, and production of the text as well as presentation of it.

Concluding Thoughts

With any data-gathering approach, consider how participants invoke ideas, practices, and accounts from both the larger and local cultures of which they are a part. Keep in mind that they may not simply borrow from these cultures or reproduce them; rather, they may make innovations as they adapt them to serve their immediate purposes. Similarly, as researchers, we adapt language and meanings as we record data; data are never entirely raw. Recording data alone confers interpretations of them because we place a conceptual frame on them through our use of language and understandings about the world.

Scrutinizing how you collect data and which data you obtain helps to locate them. Such scrutiny also helps you when coding and categorizing because you will be able to place your emerging analysis in its social context. Then you can make more precise comparisons when coding data. By studying your methods, you will improve both your methodological skills and the quality of your data. Subsequently, your scrutiny may lead you to realize later that collecting another kind of data with a different method may answer questions in your emerging analysis. For large projects such as theses, you might use two or more data-gathering approaches. For a major funded research project, multi-method and multi-site approaches often prove to be useful. If you construct a research proposal that builds in possibilities for pursuing data in several settings, you have the flexibility later on to use or develop methods that address emergent questions.

In the interim, we next move on to begin the analytic phase of our grounded theory journey, through coding our early data.

NOTES

- 1 Biernacki (1986) devised a sophisticated form of snowball sampling with referral chains to find his sample of naturally recovered addicts. His project was eventually funded and he and his staff conducted 101 lengthy interviews with these former addicts as well as comparative interviews with recovered addicts who had undergone treatment.
- 2 Matthew J. James reminded me that all research has emergent themes (Personal communication, September 17, 2004). True, but the degree to which various methodological approaches encourage or inhibit them differs. Grounded theory methods are founded on facilitating emergence.
- 3 Grounded theory studies have long been accused of building analyses on haphazard, skimpy data (Lofland & Lofland, 1984). Creswell (1998) views grounded theory as primarily based upon a limited number of interviews (20–30), but he does not challenge using a small sample. Depending on the purpose and the quality of data and analysis, a limited sample might be sufficient. A dissertation or major study requires more interviews when they are the sole source of data.

Now the tendency to shortcut data collection permeates all kinds of methods, including ethnography. As Schneider (1997) argues, the rush to theorizing reflects political and career decisions beyond specific research problems to the detriment of both theory and research.

- 4 These ethnographic questions are adapted from Mitchell's (1991) longer list.
- 5 Not all telling texts may be so straightforward. The most significant extant texts may be relatively unavailable and require obtrusive methods to find. Obtaining these texts may contradict informed consent rules and institutional review board policies that serve to protect the powerful. Dalton's *Men Who Manage* (1959) offers a classic example. Dalton received the confidential documents confirming the status characteristics of managers from a secretary who believed in the value of Dalton's project.