

study is to **generate or discover a theory**, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation. This situation is one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to a phenomenon. To study how people act and react to this phenomenon, the researcher collects primarily interview data, makes multiple visits to the field, develops and interrelates categories of information, and writes theoretical propositions or hypotheses or presents a visual picture of the theory.

Two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, first articulated grounded theory research in 1967 and later elaborated on it through subsequent books (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In contrast to the a priori theoretical orientation in sociology, they held that theories should be "grounded" in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social process of people. Despite a rich history of collaboration between Glaser and Strauss that produced works such as *Awareness of Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) and *Time for Dying* (Glaser & Strauss, 1968), they have differed about grounded theory in recent years, leading Glaser (1992) to launch vitriolic attacks against Strauss. However, both Glaser and Strauss continue to write about grounded theory approaches, and it has gained popularity in sociology, nursing, education, and other social science fields.

The centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied. Strauss and Corbin (1994), for example, mention that a theory is a plausible relationship among concepts and sets of concepts. This theory, developed by the researcher, is articulated toward the end of a study and can assume the form of a narrative statement (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a visual picture (Morrow & Smith, 1995), or a series of hypotheses or **propositions** (Creswell & Brown, 1992).

The researcher typically conducts 20-30 interviews based on several visits "to the field" to collect interview data to **saturate** (or find information that continues to add until no more can be found) the categories. A **category** represents a unit of information composed of events, happenings, and instances (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher also collects and analyzes observations and documents, but these data forms are atypical. While the researcher collects data, she or he begins analysis. In fact, my image for data collection in a

grounded theory study is a "zigzag" process—out to the field to gather information, analyze the data, back to the field to gather more information, analyze the data, and so forth. The participants interviewed are theoretically chosen—in **theoretical sampling**—to help the researcher best form the theory. How many passes one makes to the field depends on whether the categories of information become **saturated** and whether the theory is elaborated in all of its complexity. This process of taking information from data collection and comparing it to emerging categories is called the **constant comparative** method of data analysis.

The process of data analysis in grounded theory research is systematic and follows a standard format:

- ▼ In **open coding**, the researcher forms initial categories of information about the phenomenon being studied by segmenting information. Within each **category**, the investigator finds several **properties**, or subcategories, and looks for data to **dimensionalize**, or show the extreme possibilities on a continuum of, the property.
- ▼ In **axial coding**, the investigator assembles the data in new ways after open coding. This is presented using a **coding paradigm or logic diagram** in which the researcher identifies a **central phenomenon** (i.e., a central category about the phenomenon), explores **causal conditions** (i.e., categories of conditions that influence the phenomenon), specifies **strategies** (i.e., the actions or interactions that result from the central phenomenon), identifies the **context** and **intervening conditions** (i.e., the narrow and broad conditions that influence the strategies), and delineates the **consequences** (i.e., the outcomes of the strategies) for this phenomenon.
- ▼ In **selective coding**, the researcher identifies a "story line" and writes a story that integrates the categories in the axial coding model. In this phase, conditional **propositions** (or hypotheses) are typically presented.
- ▼ Finally, the researcher may develop and visually portray a **conditional matrix** that elucidates the social, historical, and economic conditions influencing the central phenomenon. This phase of analysis is not frequently found in grounded theory studies.

The result of this process of data collection and analysis is a theory, a **substantive-level theory**, written by the researchers close to a specific

problem or population of people. This theory is subjected to further empirical testing because now we know the variables or categories from field-based data, although the study may end at this point because the generation of a theory is a legitimate outcome of the study.

A **grounded theory study** challenges researchers for the following reasons:

- The investigator needs to set aside, as much as possible, theoretical ideas or notions so that the analytic, substantive theory can emerge.
- Despite the evolving, inductive nature of this form of qualitative inquiry, the researcher must recognize that this is a systematic approach to research with specific steps in data analysis.
- The researcher faces the difficulty of determining when categories are saturated or when the theory is sufficiently detailed.
- The researcher needs to recognize that the primary outcome of this study is a theory with specific components: a central phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, conditions and context, and consequences. These are prescribed categories of information in the theory.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY

An **ethnography** is a description and interpretation of a cultural or social group or system. The researcher examines the group's observable and learned patterns of **behavior**, customs, and ways of life (Harris, 1968). As both a process and an outcome of research (Agar, 1980), an ethnography is a product of research, typically found in book-length form. As a process, ethnography involves prolonged observation of the group, typically through **participant observation** in which the researcher is **immersed** in the day-to-day lives of the people or through one-on-one interviews with members of the group. The researcher studies the meanings of **behavior**, **language**, and interactions of the **culture-sharing group**.

Ethnography has its genesis in cultural anthropology through early 20th-century anthropologists such as Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-

Brown, and Mead and their studies of comparative cultures. Although they took the natural sciences as a model for research, they differed from traditional scientific approaches through the firsthand collection of data of existing "primitive" cultures (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). In the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists such as Park, Dewey, and Mead at the University of Chicago adapted the anthropological field methods to study cultural groups in the United States (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Recently, scientific approaches to ethnography have expanded to include "schools" or subtypes of ethnography with different theoretical orientations and aims such as structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, cultural and cognitive anthropology, feminism, Marxism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, cultural studies, and postmodernism (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). This has led to a distinct lack of orthodoxy in ethnography as a general approach to the description and interpretation of a cultural or social group, and authors need to be explicit about what school they espouse when they discuss this approach, especially as it has been embraced by researchers in many fields outside anthropology and sociology such as the health sciences and education.

My approach is to rely mainly on procedures found in the sociological approach of Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and to draw on the educational anthropology of Wolcott (1994b) and Fetterman (1989). Through these texts, one finds that the ethnographer begins the study by looking at people in interaction in ordinary settings and by attempting to discern pervasive patterns such as life cycles, events, and cultural themes (H. F. Wolcott, personal communication, October 10, 1996). **Culture** is an amorphous term, not something "lying about" (Wolcott, 1987, p. 41) but rather something the researcher attributes to a group as he or she looks for patterns of daily living. It is inferred from the words and actions of members of the group and is assigned to this group by the researcher. It consists of looking for what people do (**behaviors**), what they say (**language**), and some tension between what they really do and what they ought to do as well as what they make and use (**artifacts**) (Spradley, 1980). Thus, the ethnographer gathers artifacts and physical trace evidence; finds stories, rituals, and myths; and/or uncovers cultural themes. Such themes are diverse, as illustrated in Winthrop's (1991) *Dictionary of Concepts in Cultural Anthropology*. Fetterman (1989), for example, suggests that the themes of

structure and function guide research of social organizations. **Structure** refers to the social structure or configuration of the group, such as the kinship or political structure of the social-cultural group. **Function** refers to patterns of the social relations among members of the group that help regulate behavior.

To establish these patterns, the ethnographer engages in extensive work in the field, called **fieldwork**, gathering information through observations, interviews, and materials helpful in developing a portrait and establishing "cultural rules" of the culture-sharing group. As Wolcott (1996) comments, "They [researchers] establish what a stranger would have to know in order to understand what is going on here or, more challenging still, what a stranger would have to know in order to be able to participate in a meaningful way" (p. 6). The ethnographer is sensitive to **fieldwork** issues (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) such as gaining access to the group through **gatekeepers**, individuals who can provide entrance to a research site. The ethnographer locates **key informants**, individuals who provide useful insights into the group and can steer the researcher to information and contacts. The field researcher also is concerned about **reciprocity** between the investigator and the subjects being studied, so that something will be returned to the people being studied in exchange for their information, and **reactivity**, the impact of the researcher on the site and the people being studied. In accord with ethical standards, the ethnographer makes his or her presence known so that **deception** about the purpose or intent of the study is not practiced.

Sensitive to these field issues, the procedures in ethnography call for a detailed **description of the culture-sharing group** or individual, an **analysis of the culture-sharing group** by themes or perspectives, and some **interpretation of the culture-sharing group** for meanings of social interaction and generalizations about human social life (Wolcott, 1994b). The amounts of weight researchers give to these three aspects vary. The final product of this effort is a **holistic** cultural portrait of the social group that incorporates both the views of the actors in the group (**emic**) and the researcher's interpretation of views about human social life in a social science perspective (**etic**). By **holistic**, I mean that the ethnographer attempts to describe as much as possible about a cultural system or social group, and this might include the group's history, religion, politics, economy, and environment (Fetterman,

1989). By **cultural portrait**, I refer to an overview of the entire cultural scene by pulling together all aspects learned about the group and showing its complexity.

The ethnography is challenging to use for the following reasons:

- The researcher needs to have a grounding in cultural anthropology and the meaning of a social-cultural system as well as the concepts typically explored by ethnographers.
- The time to collect data is extensive, involving prolonged time in the field.
- In many ethnographies, the narratives are written in a literary, almost storytelling approach, an approach that may limit the audience for the work and may be challenging for authors accustomed to traditional approaches to writing social and human science research.
- There is a possibility that the researcher will "go native" and be unable to complete the study or be compromised in the study. This is but one issue in the complex array of fieldwork issues facing ethnographers who venture into an unfamiliar cultural group or system.

A CASE STUDY

Whereas some consider "the **case**" an object of study (Stake, 1995) and others consider it a methodology (e.g., Merriam, 1988), a **case study** is an exploration of a "bounded system" or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context. This **bounded system** is bounded by time and place, and it is the **case** being studied—a program, an event, an activity, or individuals. For example, several programs (**multi-site** study) or a single program (**within-site** study) might be selected for study. **Multiple sources of information** include observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports. The **context of the case** involves situating the case within its setting, which may be a physical setting or the social, historical, and/or economic setting for the case. The focus may be on the case

that, because of its uniqueness, requires study (*intrinsic case study*), or it may be on an issue or issues, with the case used instrumentally to illustrate the issue (an *instrumental case study*) (Stake, 1995). When more than one case is studied, it is referred to as a *collective case study* (Stake, 1995).

Many of my students choose the case study as their preferred approach to qualitative research. Their rationale often is that a case study is familiar; they undoubtedly have read case studies in psychology (Freud), medicine (case analysis of a problem), law (case law), and/or political science (case reports). Case study research holds a long, distinguished history across many disciplines. Hamel (1993) traces the origin of modern social science case studies through anthropology and sociology. He cites anthropologist Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islands, French sociologist LePlay's study of families, and the case studies of the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Thomas & Znaniecki's [1958] study, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*) as antecedents of qualitative case study research. Today, the case study writer has a large array of texts and approaches from which to choose to develop a case study. Yin (1989), for example, espouses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to case study development and discusses the exploratory and descriptive *qualitative* case studies. Merriam (1988) advocates a general approach to qualitative case studies in the field of education. Hamel (1993), a sociologist, provides a historical and problem-centered discussion of qualitative case studies. Stake (1995), the approach I use extensively, systematically establishes procedures for case study research and uses Stake's own case study of Harper School as an example.

In conducting case study research, I recommend that investigators first consider what type of case study is most promising and useful. The case can be single or collective, multi-sited or within-site, focused on a case or on an issue (intrinsic, instrumental) (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1989). In choosing what case to study, an array of possibilities for *purposeful sampling* is available. I prefer to select cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process, or event I want to portray, but I also may select ordinary cases, accessible cases, or unusual cases.

The data collection is extensive, drawing on *multiple sources of information* such as observations, interviews, documents, and audio-

visual materials. For example, Yin (1989) recommends six types of information: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. The type of analysis of these data can be a *holistic analysis* of the entire case or an *embedded analysis* of a specific aspect of the case (Yin, 1989). Through this data collection, a detailed *description* of the case emerges, as do an *analysis of themes* or issues and an interpretation or *assertions* about the case by the researcher (Stake, 1995). This analysis is rich in the *context of the case* or setting in which the case presents itself (Merriam, 1988). The investigator narrates the study through techniques such as a chronology of major events followed by an up-close or a detailed perspective about a few incidents. When multiple cases are chosen, a typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a *within-case analysis*, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a *cross-case analysis*, as well as assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case. In the final interpretive phase, the researcher reports, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) mention, the "lessons learned" from the case.

Some of the challenges inherent in qualitative case study development are as follows:

- The researcher must identify his or her case. I can pose no clear solution for the researcher; he or she must decide what bounded system to study, recognizing that several might be possible candidates for this selection and realizing that either the case itself or an issue, for which a case or cases are selected to illustrate, is worthy of study.
- The researcher must consider whether to study a single case or multiple cases. I am reminded how the study of more than one case dilutes the overall analysis; the more cases an individual studies, the greater the lack of depth in any single case. When a researcher chooses multiple cases, the issue becomes "How many?"—which I cannot answer except to indicate the lack of depth issue. Typically, however, the researcher chooses no more than four cases. What motivates the researcher to consider a large number of cases is the idea of *generalizability*, a term that holds little meaning for most qualitative researchers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).