CHAPTER 2

Interpretation

The Person as Instrument

Research is not a machine to grind out facts. The main machine in all research is a human researcher. Or a team of humans. In qualitative research, the humans have a lot to do, planning the study, arranging for situations to observe, interviewing people, examining records, putting patches of ideas together, writing reports. When you think about using instruments in research, you need to include humans as some of the main instruments.

Humans are the researchers. Humans are being studied. Humans are the interpreters, among them the readers of our reports.

2.1. INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research is sometimes defined as *interpretive research*. All research requires interpretations, and, in fact, human behavior requires interpretation minute by minute. But interpretive research is investigation that relies heavily on observers defining and redefining the meanings of what they see and hear. If no one is hurt, something like a car crash may mean pretty much the same to people—just crush and crumple—but as they think about it, some see the crash as negligence, some as fate, and some as need for stricter laws. Their interpretations are not only what

they think after they have stopped to think about it but are part of the seeing. The perceptions we have of objects and events and relationships are simultaneously interpretive. They get continuing reinterpretation. Qualitative research draws heavily on interpreting by researchers—and also on interpreting by the people they study and by the readers of the research reports.

As you know, interpretations can be faulty. Part of learning how to do qualitative research is learning how to minimize the flaws in our observations and assertions. We will "triangulate" our data in order to increase confidence that we have correctly interpreted how things work. Sometimes our views are faulty because they are too simplistic. A car crash has multiple causes. So does a scolding. How things work can be more complicated than they seem at first. Triangulation will help us recognize that things need more explanation than we at first thought.

Here's an example. Suppose you apply for a fellowship. You wonder how other applicants, your competitors, are making their applications appealing. You ask some people what they think and conclude that the winning applications will be those portraying a "well-rounded personality." There, you did a tiny qualitative study, asking a complex question and making an interpretation. Your interpretation of those data may have been well reasoned but, for your purpose, faulty. Too little evidence. It could be that these judges are giving highest ratings to applicants not well rounded but who have concentrated on a very few unusual activities (fruit tree grafting and debate competition, as examples). Had you struggled harder, had you triangulated your finding, perhaps by asking previous winners and looking on the web for the rationale of the competition, you might have reached a better interpretation. But that is common sense, you say. Yes, qualitative research is disciplined common sense.

Furthermore, the interpretations of qualitative research give emphasis to human values and experiences. Norman Denzin, an advocate of interpretive interactionism (a form of qualitative research) has said:

> Interpretive interactionism attempts to make the meanings that circulate in the world of lived experience accessible to the reader. It endeavors to capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied. The focus of interpretive research is on those life experiences that radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences. (2001, p. 1)

So that is one way of doing qualitative research: finding the meanings of personally transformative experience. Figuring out the "Wow!" in a lifetime.

But other qualitative researchers are more intent on understanding ordinary behavior, such as walking a child to kindergarten or repairing a tire. It usually is not this walking thing or repairing thing itself but what it tells of family protection or self-reliance. Many anthropologists urge researchers to study not what is extraordinary but what is common. Here, again, is contention between social science's interest in the generalizable and predictable and the social action and professional service interest in the unique case, the situational. Both can be served by qualitative research.

Denzin (2001) also spoke of "critical" interpretive study, meaning "important," of course, but also meaning "interpreting things in terms of particular value commitments" (sometimes ideological, such as feminist or Christian or social justice beliefs) for the purpose of contributing to improvement of the human condition. Being a social activist or evangelist can be part of research, or it can be a role assumed alongside research, kept separate. The researcher has a choice. Researchers have so many choices, if their jobs permit it. Sometimes those choices are more or less decided for them. The choices of view have long been a part of research.

These are choices for each researcher. Interpretive interactionism is not the only way of doing qualitative research, not even a very common way. Opponents to any particular social action or to reform broadly can also do qualitative research. The methods are there for anyone to use, but it is common to find the majority of qualitative researchers inclined to interpret the way things work more along the lines of left-wing politics than right-wing politics. That's the way people have been lining up, but it's not part of the definition.

There is no clear border between common sense interpretation, reform-minded interpretation, and research interpretation. Research interpretation will usually be deliberated, abstract, and literary. When the procedures for deliberation are formalized, laid out step by step, we might capitalize it as Interpretive Research to distinguish it from daily thinking and advocacy. A good qualitative research project will deal deeply with a few of the complexities of human experience. It will draw upon the best thinking, the best writing of people, past and present; thus it is literary. For that reason we review the research literature. But perhaps the most distinctive feature of qualitative research is that it is interpretive, a struggle with meanings.

2.2. MICROINTERPRETATION AND MACROINTERPRETATION

A researcher's struggle with meanings occurs in many places and takes many forms, but one important distinction among interpretations is between those small and personally oriented and those large and societially oriented. It also is situational thinking versus universal thinking. In Section 1.3 we made the distinction between macroresearch and microresearch. Now we make a similar distinction between microinterpretation and macrointerpretation. How things generally work is a macrointerpretation. How a particular thing works in a particular situation is a microinterpretation. Both use qualitative research, but most of the time qualitative research results in microinterpretation.

Microinterpretation is giving meaning in terms of what an individual person can experience, such as climbing a particular tree, or listening to the opening movement of a concerto while driving home, or becoming acquainted with the cooking course your friend took. You might think of it as a single instance, something like a single "measurement," however complicated, in the form of human experience. If you were to analyze the dialogue between two marines, we could call the analysis *microanalysis*, and the meanings that you give to their expressions would be microinterpretation. Lots of good qualitative research relies on microinterpretation.[1]

Macrointerpretation is making meaning in terms of what large groups of people (or machines or other bodies) do, such as choosing a president, preparing for college, or nursing infants. Individuals, of course, experience voting, preparing for college, and nursing babies, but when we think of that experience over great numbers of people, it is generalized, getting a special kind of interpretation. It creates a different kind of knowledge. Here in the United States we conceptualize blue states and red states, states having majorities of Democratic and Republican voting. We conceptualize general increases in tuition. We think not so much of the extraordinary closeness of a mother and nursing infant

[1]In his *Dictionary of Terms*, Thomas Schwandt (1997) defines a method called microethnography as

> a particular type of qualitative inquiry specifically concerned with exhaustive, fine-grained examination of either a very small unit within an organization, group or culture (e.g., a particular classroom in a school); a specific activity within an organizational unit (e.g., how physicians communicate with elderly patients in an emergency room); or ordinary everyday conversation. (p. 94)

but of a generalization such as the onset of lactose intolerance. We may call the study of these experiences across many instances "macroanalysis" and the interpretation of the observations "macrointerpretation."

It is easy to think of these two, the micro and the macro, as shading into each other, from small numbers of experiences to large, but it is difficult to get to general knowledge from particular knowledge, no matter the number of people involved. Patterns of immigration are not easy to learn by studying individual immigrants. Is there gradual shading or a discrete change from general knowledge to particular knowledge? And from particular to general? Something to think about.

In this book we are most interested in research on instances, particulars, cases, narratives, situations, and episodes—on how individual things work. Qualitative research primarily calls for microanalysis and microinterpretation. In the following example from the 1970s, the researcher presents what happened in one school being newly equipped for teaching and learning, including the provision of chairs. The episode called for microinterpretation, but the researcher, David Hamilton, was also intent upon generalization, upon macrointerpretation. He wanted the reader to think about the general policy of equipping schools and how it relates to the methods of teaching in those classrooms.

To tell his story, Hamilton (no date) alluded to the role of researcher as detective, teasing out assumptions, uncovering reasons for practice, and delving into myths and dogma. The portion quoted in Box 2.1 was abstracted from his in-depth study of a Scottish open-plan school.[2] He presents "the case of the missing chairs." In the process he uncovers a number of relationships, patches, microinterpretations, and macrointerpretations.

We examine this report as an example of microanalysis of primary school teaching, but the author's interpretations as to school policy and empathy for teachers' beliefs put macroanalysis out in front. The report also should help us think about the difficulty of condensing the experience of the researcher on-site to the few words of a report.

(text resumes on p. 46)

[2]The reading is long, but it is a good place in this book to think of research as its embodiment in a report. Several ideas (such as particularization, interpretation, subjectivity, and causality) expressed on earlier pages are to be found in this report. The reading should help clarify the distinction between micro- and macrointerpretation. But to me, your experience in reading Hamilton's report is more important than its content. Understanding how things work is a matter of experience.

BOX 2.1. The Case of the Missing Chairs

DAVID HAMILTON, *Scottish Council for Research in Education*

There is a school of thought in primary education that argues that there is no need to provide every child with a seat or a work surface. Support for this idea comes from various sources. New schools find the concept financially acceptable since it releases money from an otherwise fixed grant for the purchase of specialist furnishings such as display screens, storage units and mobile trolleys. Architects endorse the idea since the resultant increase in free space enables them to create more flexible designs. And finally, educationalists lend their weight to the scheme since it visibly undermines a long tradition of simultaneous class (i.e., whole group) teaching.

The force of these economic, architectural and educational arguments has been considerable. According to one recent English review: "new purpose-built open plan schools rarely contain seating accommodation for more than about seventy percent of the children at any one time." Not all practitioners, however, have found this innovation equally acceptable. Hence, like many other elements in the modern primary school, chairs and tables have become the object of prolonged and often emotive debate. Superficially, the arguments and counter-arguments are about the allocation of financial resources and the utilisation of available space. At a deeper level, however, they also interact with more fundamental concerns about the theory and practice of primary education. In short, discussions about tables and chairs are also debates about methods and curricula.

The first part of this article explores the origins and assumptions of these debates. The second part relates their logic to the experience of a case study school. Throughout, two questions are considered:

1. What are the shifts in educational thinking that have given rise to these discussions?
2. How do these shifts relate to a reduced provision of chairs?

The standard answer to these questions is that a lowered requirement of chairs follows automatically from a weaker emphasis upon class and jotter-based teaching. The experience of the case study school (and the argument of this essay) suggests that the case for this innovation is weak and inconclusive.

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BOX 2.1. *(cont.)*

CHAIRS: A VANISHING RESOURCE?

At some point in the late 1960s (or so it appears) the idea began to circulate that a primary school could be efficiently furnished with less than one hundred per cent seating. The source of this notion is as yet obscure. The fact that there are no references to it in either the Plowden Report (1967) or the Scottish Education Department "Primary Memorandum" (1965) suggests that it may have been a grass-roots or even an imported (American?) idea.

The rationale for limiting the number of chairs in a school derives from three assumptions:

1. That the basic unit of teaching should be the individual child rather than the whole group.
2. That it is possible to organise work programmes whereby children can be employed on different activities.
3. That not all learning activities require a chair.

There are two problems with this rationale. First, none of these assumptions specifically requires that the provision of seats should be fixed at less than one hundred percent. In fact, it would be possible for a teacher to accept all three ideas and still legitimately demand a full complement of chairs. This would follow, for example, if she added a fourth assumption: that children should be free to choose their own sequence through the various activities of their work programme. Indeed, if a teacher considered this last assumption to be the most important, then it would definitely rule out a reduced provision of chairs. The freedom of individual choice would, by necessity, include the freedom for every child to choose a seated activity. Thus, to restrict the number of chairs in a school is automatically to limit the number of curriculum options open to teachers and pupils. Certainly, an increase of chairs may also produce a shortage of space; but this is not an equivalent problem. Space can be created more easily than extra seating.

The second problem surrounds the levels of seating that are usually considered as realistic (i.e., sixty to seventy percent). The derivation of these figures is as obscure as the origins of the initial idea. It is sometimes stated that a sixty-six percent (i.e., two-thirds) seating level fits easily where classes are subdivided into three groups. In such cases the expectation is that two thirds of the class group will need chairs

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BOX 2.1. *(cont.)*

whereas one third will be working at non-seated activities or out of the class area. On balance this explanation is inadequate. It does not justify the choice of three groups or indicate how a policy of group squares with the assumption that the individual child should be the basic teaching unit. (By the same token it would be just as reasonable to divide the class into four groups and have a seating level seventy-five or even fifty percent.)

Given the educational weakness of the foregoing argument, an alternative source for the quoted figures is that they derive from the application of a standard architectural formula. By this means a school's optimum seating requirements are calculated in the same manner as the size of playground and staffroom. Nevertheless, these requirements cannot be predicted unambiguously. They also depend on the kind of educational policy followed by a school. An optimum figure in one situation may be totally inappropriate in another.

ACCIDENTAL DISSEMINATION?

The rather hybrid nature of these ideas about seating levels suggests that they may have come into being for no other purpose than to focus attention on out-of-date classroom procedures. That is, they were formulated primarily to draw attention to the shortcomings of educational practice not as a model for changing it.

If this last explanation is in fact correct, then the initial adoption of reduced seating levels may have been accidental—the reluctant or ill-informed act of a financially hard-pressed adviser administrator. Whatever their origins, the rapid widespread dissemination of these ideas was almost certainly attributable to concerned pressure of administrators, college lecturers and architects: three powerful groups in primary education. Although acting for different reasons—expediency, conviction or functional utility—their combined advocacy has been considerable.

AT SCHOOL LEVEL

In the early 1970s teachers from the case study school attended a local college of education for courses leading to the Froebel (early education) certificate. During those years, they first encountered the idea that a

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BOX 2.1. *(cont.)*

primary school class might be organised around less than one hundred per cent seating. At that time, however, the issue was of academic rather than practical concern, a matter for staffroom discussion rather than school-wide decision.

In 1973 the situation changed. The plans for the new lower primary building had reached the stage where a seating level had to be decided. Consensus among the staff was difficult to achieve since individual members reacted differently to the idea that seating levels might be reduced below one chair per child. Basically, three viewpoints were expressed. One (small) group of teachers were prepared to put their beliefs to the test and try out the idea. A second group (probably the majority) accepted the general notion of a reduced provision but felt that their own situation constituted a special case. For example, one teacher argued that she preferred to teach writing by means of class lessons. A third group of teachers were less easily converted. They felt reluctant to abandon either the principle or the practice of providing a full complement of seats for their children. A characteristic feature of this last group was that they felt it was educationally important that each child should have their "own" chair.

To resolve this issue the headmaster of the school was asked to act as an arbitrator. By his decision the seating level was duly fixed at sixty percent. In principle this action closed the debate. In practice, however, the teachers were left with a possible alternative: if the designated seating level proved inadequate, it could still be topped up with infant-sized furniture left over from the old buildings. The flexibility of this arrangement became apparent when some of the ordered furniture failed to arrive in time for the opening of the new building. The old tables and chairs were immediately pressed into service and, in a complete reversal of the original intention, were "topped up" by the new furniture as it arrived. Eventually, a surplus of chairs was created—which meant that each teacher could operate their own seating policy. Some chose the figure of sixty-percent while others retained at least one chair for each child.

This arrangement did not last for very long. Within a term all the teachers had built up their seating levels to at least one hundred percent. The topping up, however, did not herald a return to class teaching. Quite the reverse: it marked a recognition that an adequate supply

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BOX 2.1. *(cont.)*

of chairs was necessary to the individualised and balanced curriculum that the case study teachers were trying to implement. Thus, despite a certain sense of public failure among the teachers who tried to work with a reduced provision, the intervening experience had taught them a great deal about the relationship between teaching methods and seating requirements.

AT CLASSROOM LEVEL

The teachers who found themselves unable to operate with a reduction in chairs reported the following experiences. In the first instance they all found it impossible to avoid times when their entire teaching group was sitting on chairs. Sometimes this arose through the teacher's own decision; at other times it arose through the actions of the children. Although the frequency of these occasions was rare and their duration short-lived, the teachers regarded them as an essential part of their work. In so far as these experiences served educational purposes that could not be achieved in any other way, the teachers were unwilling to abandon them for the sake of a handful of chairs.

A second experience related to the use of chairs as a moveable resource. The teachers conceded that it might be possible to use less than one hundred percent chairs for much of the school day but had found that this usually required a certain proportion of chairs to be moved constantly from place to place. This occurred, for example, when a group of children wanted to set up a "school" in the "shop," or a "hairdressing salon" in the home base. The teachers not only felt that the movement of chairs created avoidable disruption but also that the associated shortage of chairs inhibited their pupil's choice of activity.

A third observation (made by the teachers of younger children) was that a limited supply of chairs could interfere with the educational principle that certain well-used areas or activities (e.g., milk, sewing, reading) should have a fixed allocation of chairs. The justification for this policy was that the presence of chairs could help children to perform activities that might otherwise be too difficult. It was also argued in favour of such a policy that it helped to prevent certain practical problems (e.g., spillage of milk, loss of sewing needles, damage of books). In

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BOX 2.1. *(cont.)*

these instances the combined weight of the educational and administrative advantages was sufficient to convince the teachers of the need for extra chairs.

Finally, all the teachers reported that they were unwilling to allow children to write while standing at a work surface or lying on the floor. The notion that children should be allowed to write in these positions has been one of the outcomes of the chairs debate. Without exception, the case study teachers reacted unfavourably to the idea. Like the erstwhile master of St. Andrew's Grammar School, they felt that children who are learning to write should be encouraged to use a suitable surface and a comfortable chair.

CONCLUSION

This article examines a rather curious discrepancy between theory and practice. It focuses on a school of thought which holds that a modern primary school can be adequately equipped with less than one chair per child. Overall, it questions the practice whereby chairs are shared rather than a guaranteed resource. In effect, this means that chairs are downgraded to the same status as painting easels, water tanks and sand trays. As a result, special rules are needed to regulate the pupils' access to them. In turn, these rules have an impact on the type of methods and curricula which can be used by teachers.

It may be expedient to improve the provision of the painting easels at the expense of chairs. But, in the process, there is surely no need to make an educational virtue out of an economic necessity.

Source: Hamilton (no date). Reprinted with permission from the Scottish Council for Research in Education.

2.3. EMPATHY

As expressed in Box 1.2, characteristic 4, qualitative research is special in its personalistic orientation, relying on empathy with the humans and enterprises studied for understanding how things work. A dictionary will say that to empathize is to look at things closely, becoming sensitive to, even vicariously experiencing, the feelings, thoughts, and happenings.

Empathy is different from sympathy, which is a feeling of personal closeness, endearment, and solace, a feeling of emotional accord. With empathy—which is a matter of perception more than emotion—it is easier, I think, to work for negotiation and problem solving. It is unlikely that empathy and sympathy will exist completely separately, but most qualitative researchers try to be empathic, less driven by sympathy. Empathy is a part of qualitative research, but, to be sure, the writings of some researchers will reflect empathy more than those of others.

In her 1995 book, *Medicine and the Family: A Feminist Perspective*, Lucy Candib spoke of qualitative research as "connected knowing." Connected knowing is the embodiment of empathy, using personal experiences and relationships to inquire how others see how things work. It relies on a studied perception of situations in context, thus working toward credibility and esteem.

One of the reminders of empathic inquiry is that the individual human is a complex person, similar in many ways to others but unique in personality and life situation. In their efforts to understand how social things work, most qualitative researchers treat each human being and the collective of all human beings as beyond full understanding. They do not aspire to an eventual full understanding, expecting that the lives of people will become ever more complex even as we reach any new insight. We study human affairs not expecting to pin down their fundamental nature, for that knowledge is well beyond the construction of what we can know.

Anthropologist Ivan Brady (2006) wrote:

> Is there some common ground that can be apprehended through the trowels, brushes, and screens of the senses that will give us a realistic impression of life in ancient places and thereby address the concerns of our environmental critics? We are one species, one subspecies in biological form, embodied more or less the same everywhere, and as conscious beings we need to know (or think we know) where we are before we are able to choose definitive courses of action. The comparative framework provided by that posture gives us access to other humans through sympathy and empathy, that is, by tapping in "fellow feeling" with speculation and imagination at work, both of which are essential parts of the interpretive equation. (p. 982)

To gain access to humans, to understand their stories, Brady challenges us to use both sympathy and empathy. Researchers will decide for

themselves how sympathetic to be. A qualitative researcher has no choice but to be empathic.

2.4. THICK DESCRIPTION AND *VERSTEHEN*

Gabriel García Márquez wrote fiction, not only about things that never happened but about things that couldn't happen, such as the following instance:

> As soon as José Arcadio closed the bedroom door, the sound of a pistol echoed through the house. A trickle of blood came out, under the door, crossed the living room, went out into the street, continued on in a straight line across the uneven terraces, went down steps and climbed over curbs, passed along the Street of the Turks, turned a corner to the right and. . . . (1967, p. 129)

In qualitative research we write about what actually happened, not about fiction, but we write also about what people say. There is more than a pinch of fiction in what people say. And what we research writers say as well.

We will not plunge into how we write reports until much later in the book. Yes, this chapter is on interpretation, but our interpretations are shaped partly by how we will express ourselves later. Writing is not a printer printing, just putting on paper what was stored in memory. Writing is part of interpretation, and interpretation is shaped by needing to be written. Columnist James Reston said, "How do I know what I think until I read what I write?" And so we talk here about *thick description*, and describing how things work.

Thick description is a concept offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, one of the great persons of qualitative research. In 1993 he wrote a monograph, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. Notice the emphasis on interpretation, not just elaborate description, but engagement in theory building. His aim was to see the thing as part of sociocultural science. We might consider what does it mean personally to be 100 years old? Limited vision? Limited access? Dependent? A description is rich if it provides abundant details, and possibly professional usefulness, but it becomes thick description if it offers connection to cultural structures and scientific knowledge.

The term *thick description* is widely used, sometimes to mean no more than "described in rich detail." Sometimes it means "described to show what the people studied were experiencing." It can mean "being wary of the opaqueness of concepts such as age, debilitation, and dementia." Geertz wanted it to mean "describing in a way that engages theoretical interpretation." He urged us to examine closely what is happening in front of us so that our readers can relate it to historical, moral, and scientific writings.

Toward the end of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, García Márquez pondered the meanings of old age and blindness. Úrsula had reached 100.

> . . . No one knew exactly when she had begun to lose her sight. Even in her later years, when she could no longer get out of bed, it seemed she was simply defeated by decrepitude, but no one discovered that she was blind. She had noticed it before the birth of José Arcadio. At first she thought it was a matter of passing debility and she secretly took marrow syrup and put honey in her eyes, but quite soon she began to realize that she was irrevocably sinking into the darkness, to a point where she never had a clear notion of the invention of the electric light, for when they put in the first bulbs she was only able to perceive the glow. She did not tell anyone about it because it would have been a public recognition of her uselessness. She concentrated on a silent schooling in the distances of things and people's voices, so that she would still be able to see with her memory what the shadows of her cataracts no longer allowed her to. Later on she was to discover the unforeseen help of odors, which were defined in the shadows with a strength that was much more convincing than that of bulk and color, and which saved her finally from the shame of defeat. In the darkness of the room she was able to thread a needle and sew a buttonhole and she knew when the milk was about to boil. She knew with so much certainty the location of everything that she herself forgot she was blind at times. On one occasion Fernanda had the whole house upset because she had lost her wedding ring and Úrsula found it on a shelf in the children's bedroom. Quite simply, while the others were going carelessly all about, she watched them with her four senses so that they never took her by surprise, and after some time she discovered that every member of the family, without realizing it, repeated the same path every day, the same actions, and almost repeated the same words at the same hour. Only when they deviated from meticulous routine did they run the risk of losing something. So when she heard Fernanda all upset because she had lost her ring, Úrsula remembered that the only thing different that she had done that day was to put the mattresses out in the

> sun because Meme had found a bedbug the night before. Since the children had been present at the fumigation, Úrsula figured that Fernanda had put the ring the only place they could not reach it: the shelf. Fernanda on the other hand, looked for it in vain. . . . (1967, p. 231)

Was that true? It was fiction. But was it as true as any explanation? Garcia Marquez's writing transports the reader to kitchen and bedroom, to movement and the mindfulness of Ursula. It is rich--but falls short of thick description. It conveys understanding of Ursula's late years but without connection to formal studies of aging. Some qualitative studies will seek such connection, others will not. Professional understanding is as important as scientific.

The German word for "understanding," *verstehen* (vair stay' en), may come to be one of the most important words for you as a qualitative researcher. Persuasively for some of us, philosopher William Dilthey (1910) argued that knowledge in the human sciences is greatly different from that of the physical sciences, the first being impersonal explanations of how things work, the second being what humans think and feel as to how things work. It was not that humans draw conclusions with little evidence, which is often true, but that, no matter how shy or subdued we are, we understand events as somehow a participant in them. *Verstehen* is that psychic interaction with the world.

It is often of little value for us simply researchers to ask people how they feel about something. Testimony is different from experience. And both are different from thick description. We ask and we watch, expecting their words and actions to reveal their conscious engagement in the situations we study. We never know what they really are thinking. But we come to understand something of the consistency and inconsistency of their experience. It is truth, although far less than all the truth. It is fiction, to a degree, but we hold it dear because, after we see it again and again, it is *verstehen*, life as they are living it.

2.5. CONTEXT AND SITUATION

Context and situation are background. They are important to the story, but they are not what the research is about. Our interpretations depend on good understanding of surrounding conditions, the context and situation. The research is about an activity or group or relationship. This

is the content of the research but not the context. The content is foreground; the context is background.

Suppose you are studying Madeleine. You aren't studying her just because she will make an interesting story. You study her because you want to understand her better. Your research question will tell what about Madeleine makes her interesting to study. The context will be some of the circumstances most helpful for understanding her. Actually, there are several contexts—for example, her family context, her school context, and her religious context. That doesn't mean how she interacts with her family, school, and church but what we should try to understand about her family, school, and church as background to her actions.

Suppose you are next going to study your own group (classroom, caseload, department). You might call it action research or self-study. You may be facing a particular problem, such as lack of communication or your reputation. Or one of the group is not fitting in very well. You need to understand the situation better. What are the surrounding conditions? What are the priorities? What are the problems? How are those priorities and problems seen differently? You know some of the answers, but you need to know more. It could be that there is more historical, political, economic, or aesthetic background than you now know. Raising questions about contexts may help you increase your understanding. Problem solving sometimes needs to wait for better understanding.

In Chapter 8 you will read about the bubble gum experiment. There were several important contexts. It was a school with a strong emphasis on teacher continuing education, particularly in art and mathematics. The school was in a poor neighborhood with parents strongly supporting the school. It was a time of national emphasis on improving test scores, more than on having experiences such as doing experiments. In the total report, these contexts were developed further than in the excerpt you will read. Some important contexts come to the researcher's mind by thinking of the areas of human study: psychology, culture, history, economics, and politics. For the bubble gum experiment,[3] there also was an ethical context. The teacher, Miss Grogan, stopped the experiment to find out who was guilty of stealing the bubble gum. The context was important, as in this paragraph:

[3]More on the bubble gum experiment appears in Section 8.2.

> This more or less unconscious choice between academic learning opportunity and social ethics opportunity was not uncommon in elementary schools generally but was seldom discussed. It was the teacher's sense of propriety that decided, and the choice made by Grogan would be supported regularly by the other teachers and parents. When asked about it, a number of children in this District's schools also had expressed support for maintaining decorum and punishing misbehavior, even at the cost of good learning activities. (Stake, 2000, p. 24)

The researcher felt it useful in helping the reader understand Grogan's teaching to interrupt the story to speak of the high priority on ethical decorum in that classroom. The reader's understanding of what happened in that mathematics class probably is influenced by the teacher's efforts to punish the thief and, more broadly, by the ethical context.

"Context" tends to be thought of as rather stable, something that does not change much from day to day. "Situation" is a more immediate background, the things that are going on right now behind the main activities of study. Often, there will be no clear boundaries between what is foreground and what is background; they blend into each other. The episode of the bubble gum experiment (this patch) was more understandable because it occurred at the end of the school year, after end-of-year tests, when strict emphasis on curriculum guidelines diminishes. That was part of the situation in which we will find Grogan's students experimenting with bubble gum.

Situations are extra important for qualitative research. The theorists invented the word "situationality," referring to the attention given to particular places, times, social backgrounds, communication styles, and other backgrounds for the activities and relationships being studied. The situation provides part of the meaning for qualitative phenomena.

Qualitative research differs from much quantitative research by giving careful study to contexts. A few context variables are included in many quantitative studies, but most others are treated as unimportant, not contributing to grand understanding of the main effects. Some quantitative studies may look at parents' hopes for a "return to normality" of children with autism. Qualitative studies may also look at parents' hopes for a return to normality, looking at a relatively few cases, paying attention to the presence of siblings, age of parents, their general knowledge of the disability, religious affiliation, the perspectives of teachers, medical resources, community services for those with disability, the mainstreaming movement, and other background characteristics. Quantitative stud-

ies could include measurements of these background variables, and some do. But there is an important difference. Qualitative researchers expect to devote much of their interpretation to context and situation. It is part of their sense of how things work. Quantitative researchers concentrate on the differences, such as age of parents, that can be counted as being part of the explanation of parental hope across the population of families of children with autism. They treat fewer influences at a time. It is part of their sense of how things work.

All this does not mean that a study cannot have parts that are quantitative and parts that are qualitative. And that does not mean that you need to decide which you are more loyal to.

Contexts are important. It would not surprise me if some qualitative researchers would include in their reports a "table of contexts" as well as a table of contents.

2.6. SKEPTICISM

People of all personalities should be involved in qualitative research. It is not just a matter of equal opportunity; it is important to have data gathered by people with different psychological dispositions. Each will add something different to the understanding of a research question. Understanding shifts with the accomplishments of large numbers of people, even though a few may be in special ways more expert than the rest. And the accomplishments of the research community are measured in the accomplishments of all who study human processes.

But one personal characteristic needed at least some of the time by almost all researchers is skepticism. Much of the time, researchers need to be dissatisfied with what they know and with the evidence available. It should regularly be seen as inadequate. Available understanding and evidence will often have to suffice, because problems need to be acted upon. And waiting until later is seldom going to increase understanding and evidence substantially. We talk more about evidence in Chapter 7.

Cheer, faith, and trust are desirable in our fellow men and women, and we would not build good social services without those traits. But doubt is also a great virtue. Doubt that immobilizes can be hurtful, but doubt can be a protective shield. Doubt can cause digging toward better understanding.

You don't want your spouse, your parents, or your children to be compulsively skeptical. You do want your doctor, your mechanic, and

your city council representative to be consistently skeptical. You want these caretakers to be persistently looking for what could be wrong.

And as you design your research, as you gather data, as you interpret what works, and as you explain to others what you are finding, you need a disposition to doubt. You need to suppose you are not getting the meaning straight and need to dig deeper. The general strategy qualitative researchers use for expressing doubt is called *triangulation*, something we work on in Chapter 7. By increasing care in gathering data and interpreting them, we increase assurance that we are on the right track and decrease tolerance for inaction.

Sometimes we need to be more skeptical than at other times. Right while gathering data from a person, it is best to try to understand and respect what is being said. It is best to treat that fact or story as an important perception. But, soon after, note should be taken as to what needs to be checked further. And both the small pictures and the big picture should several times be examined for clues to other meanings as to what makes things work.

Skepticism

Far star that tickles for me my sensitive plate
And fries a couple of ebon atoms white,
I don't believe I believe a thing you state.
I put no faith in the seeming facts of light.
I don't believe I believe you're the last in space,
I don't believe you're anywhere near the last,
I don't believe what makes you red in the face
Is after explosion going away so fast.
The universe may or may not be very immense.
As a matter of fact there are times when I am apt
To feel it close in tight against my sense
Like a caul in which I was born and still am wrapped.
(Robert Frost, 1990, p. 369)

2.7. EMPHASIS ON INTERPRETATION

Qualitative researchers such as Frederick Erickson, Yvonna Lincoln, and I rely heavily on direct interpretation of events and less on interpreted measurements. All research has a dependence on interpretation, but

with standard quantitative designs, there is an effort to limit the role of personal interpretation during that period between the time the design is set and the time the data are collected. Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field making observations and making interpretations iteratively.

In an outstanding summary of the nature of qualitative study, anthropologist Frederick Erickson (1986) claimed that the primary characteristic of qualitative research is the priority given to interpretation. He said that the findings are not just findings but "assertions." These assertions are the best-developed meanings we give to the most important things, including "how they work." Given up-close interaction of the researcher with persons in the field, given a constructivist orientation to knowledge, given the attention to participant intentionality and sense of self, however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to put forward a personal interpretation, an assertion. Erickson drew attention to the ethnographers' traditional emphasis on emic issues, those concerns and values recognized in the behavior and language of the people being studied. Thick description, alternative interpretations, and multiple realities are expected. Ongoing attention to complex meanings is much more difficult when the instruments of data gathering are objectively interpretable checklists as found in surveys. An ongoing, subjective, interpretive role of the researcher is common in the work of qualitative research.

Interpretation is an act of composition. The interpreter takes descriptions and makes them more complex, drawing upon a few conceptual relationships. He or she might take the term *work* and give it muscle, durability, remuneration, and self-respect. These can be some of the larger meanings of *work*. He or she might take an episode observed at the workplace and give it personality, history, tension, and implication. The best interpretations will be logical extensions of the simple description but also will include contemplative, speculative, even aesthetic extension. The reader would be deceived if allowed to think that these interpretations had been agreed upon, certified in some way. They are contributions of the researcher, written so as to make it clear they are personal interpretations. All people make interpretations. All research requires interpretations. Qualitative research relies heavily on interpretive perceptions throughout the planning, data gathering, analysis, and write-up of the study.