CHAPTER

2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY AND QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

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INTRODUCTION

Which data-gathering tools you use depends largely on the research question at hand. You do not use interviewing to analyze census data; you don't count to get descriptions of what happened in a closed-door meeting. In practice, researchers choose topics that lend themselves to quantitative or qualitative techniques based on their interests, personalities, and talents. If you enjoy talking with people and shudder just thinking about endless streams of numbers, you are more likely to choose a project suitable for in-depth interviewing than one requiring reams of statistical data.

In addition, the choice of techniques also depends on your willingness to accept the assumptions underlying each set of tools. Researchers who use quantitative tools, techniques that emphasize measuring and counting, are called ***positivists;*** those who prefer the qualitative tools of observation, questioning, and description are called ***naturalists.*** Positivists and naturalists differ in their assumptions about what is important to study, what can be known, what research tools and designs are appropriate, and what standards should be used to judge the quality of the research. Taken together, these assumptions are termed ***research paradigms*** or ***research philosophies.***

Positivists assume that reality is fixed, directly measurable, and knowable and that there is just one truth, one external reality. In contrast, naturalistic researchers assume that reality constantly changes and can be known only indirectly, through the interpretations of people; they accept the possibility that there are multiple versions of reality. People who are uncomfortable with such uncertainty are more likely to choose the quantitative paradigm with its assumptions of a single, measurable (countable) and knowable truth; people who can tolerate uncertainty are more likely to favor a qualitative paradigm with its acceptance of multiple perspectives of truth and constantly changing reality.

Not that long ago, many quantitative researchers looked down on any project that did not involve precise measurement; they rejected observational research and open-ended interviewing as unscientific. Qualitative researchers were equally critical of positivists' work, arguing that the positivists' search for generalizable rules and their focus on quantification ignored matters that are important but not easily counted and denied the complexity and the conditional nature of reality.

Fortunately, the conflict has calmed down in recent years. There is widespread recognition that people can do good work using either paradigm as long as they adhere to its underlying assumptions. To help you understand the assumptions behind qualitative interviews, in this chapter we compare the assumptions of the positivist and naturalistic approaches.

CHOOSING A PHILOSOPHY OF RESEARCH

Why do you need to understand differences in philosophies of research? Why not just go ahead and do a survey or carry out the interviews? You can, of course; but for several reasons (listed below), it is better first to understand the assumptions behind the research tools you choose.

1. The assumptions provide guidance for conducting your research. They prescribe your research role—whether you should try to be neutral or let your own personality come through. They indicate whether you must ask each person in a study the same questions in an identical way or can change questions midstream.
2. Dissertation committee members, institutional review board members, and journal reviewers and editors might follow different research philosophies from yours and may be unwilling to accept the legitimacy of your approach unless you can make its assumptions clear.
3. You have to comply with the research standards specific to the research paradigm you are using rather than those that guide alternative approaches. Qualitative interviewers need not apologize for not interviewing hundreds of people any more than quantitative researchers need to apologize for not producing in-depth descriptions.
4. Understanding the theoretical assumptions helps you recognize what the techniques you are working with do well and what they do less well, and lets you design your research to take full advantage of their strengths and compensate for their weaknesses.

To summarize: First, the assumptions of the research paradigm guide how you do your work; second, they enable you to explain the methods you are using to your professors, to editors or reviewers, and to members of the institutional review board; third, each research paradigm comes with its own standards for evaluating the quality of research; and finally, fully understanding the assumptions that

undergird the techniques you use gives you confidence to build on the strengths and offset the weaknesses of those techniques.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POSITIVIST AND NATURALIST–CONSTRUCTIONIST PARADIGMS

Research philosophies differ on the goals of the research and the way to achieve these goals. Is the purpose to test theories and discover general principles, or is it to describe and explain complex situations? Should the work be primarily deductive; that is, should it start out with broad theories and suppositions and then systematically test their implications? Or should it be inductive; that is, should it build explanations from the ground up, based on what is discovered? Is there one truth out there that the researcher is trying to measure, or are there many possibly contradictory ones?

Positivists claim there is a single, objective reality that can be observed and measured without bias using standardized instruments. Naturalists and, in particular, interpretive constructionists, accept that there is a reality but argue that it cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, and expectations. That lens affects what people see and how they interpret what they find. What we know, then, is not objective; it is always filtered through people, always subjective.

For the positivists, the goal is a universal truth, a rule or explanation that is always true so long as specified conditions hold. For the naturalists,

what is discovered is embedded in a complex and changing reality from which it cannot be reasonably abstracted. Naturalists seek to explain what they have seen, regardless of whether their findings can be extended beyond the time and circumstances of the current study. Naturalistic research is focused more on understanding what has happened in a specific circumstance than on trying to predict what will happen next.

In the positivist paradigm, the researcher sees himself or herself as a neutral recorder. Different researchers using the same instruments should reach the same conclusions. Positivists evaluate the success of their research in part by measuring how closely the findings of different researchers match. Though recognizing that no data collection instrument is perfect, positivists seek to develop standardized instruments that they believe precisely tap a single reality. They seek to imitate the sciences that have developed quantitative ways of measuring physical, biological, or chemical phenomena in replicable ways. In addition, positivists judge research in terms of its validity—that is, the extent to which their research tools actually do measure the underlying concept that they are supposed to measure.

Naturalists who emphasize that all meaning is sifted through people's prior experience and biases are called ***constructionists*** because they believe that people build or construct their understanding of the external world—that is, they interpret it. Naturalist and constructionist researchers accept that researchers, as well as research subjects, make interpretations and that it is neither possible nor desirable for the researcher to eliminate all biases or expectations. Because they cannot wipe out their own experiences and expectations, researchers need to be cautious not to impose their expectations on interviewees and should remain aware of how their expectations affect what they see and hear.

Under the naturalist–constructionist paradigm, the fact that interviewers or observers reach different conclusions is not considered problematic, since meaning is always contextual and always interpreted. If one interviewee says the meeting was a success and another says it was a failure, a positivist would say that one is probably wrong or being deceptive. But the naturalist–constructionist would say that this apparent contradiction is intriguing, that both interviewees could be speaking the truth as they see it, and then would try to explore what "successful meetings" or "unsuccessful meetings" meant to each of the speakers. Positivists *assume* that respondents understand the meaning of their questions in an identical way; constructionists are more likely to *assume* that interviewees have different frames of reference and then to try to discover the lenses through which their interviewees see the world.

Positivists aim to work out theories that apply to people or societies broadly. Naturalists focus more on themes that are true at some time or in some places, while working to learn which elements of a complex environment affected what was seen or heard. Qualitative work is judged more on its freshness—its ability to discover new themes and new explanations—than on its generalizability. It is also evaluated for its richness, vividness, and accuracy in describing complex situations or cultures. The quality of evidence that supports the conclusions is important, as are the soundness of the design and the thoroughness of the data collection and analysis.

Positivists design their work to test their informed guesses, which they call *hypotheses,* about what the findings will be. They usually take their hypotheses from prior studies. Typically, positivist research simplifies a setting or situation, examining the relationship between only two or three factors—termed *variables*—at

a time, holding the rest of the environment constant, statistically or experimentally. Whether results would hold in a more complex and variable environment is never certain. Naturalists take the opposite approach, examining how a variety of factors have interacted over time. They try to describe and explain a complex situation or process without simplifying it.

As an example, positivist researchers might look at discrimination in the workplace, sorting out a few key factors that could be involved. For instance, they might examine the relationship between gender and promotions to see if men who were promoted had more negative personnel evaluations than women who were not promoted. Or they might look at the statistical relationship between gender, race, and salary over time to see if there has been a change in the importance of gender or race in predicting salary levels. Naturalist researchers are more likely to approach the same research topic by examining the steps involved in a promotion, the people who control the key decisions, and the factors they weigh more or less heavily. Are some kinds of experience weighed more heavily than others, and if so, who controls access to the positions that allow the employees to get this experience?

These differences in philosophy influence all stages of research, from the literature review to the final write-up. Positivists focus more on testing existing theories, so they need to carefully examine prior literature, and they often design their research based on concepts and themes others have introduced. Naturalistic researchers read the literature very differently, looking for engaging topics, unanswered questions, disagreements between authors, or social problems that need investigation. Naturalistic researchers do not ignore the literature, but they are careful not to allow research that has gone before to overly influence what they look at and how they understand it.

The role of the researcher differs substantially in the two paradigms. Positivist researchers believe that if they are sufficiently careful, use standardized off-the-shelf instruments, and take a neutral role, they can avoid influencing those whom they are studying. Naturalist researchers, rather than deny that they influence what they are studying, monitor the impact they have. They are active participants in the research; their personalities, their knowledge, their curiosity, and their sensitivity all impact the quality of the work.

Differences in assumptions about the neutrality of the researcher influence not only how the research is carried out but also how the final report is written. In positivist work, the authors focus on the statistical conclusions; the author's analysis of the data is presented authoritatively. Rather than concluding, "This is what I found," they argue, "This is the way it is." In positivist research, the researchers often disappear from the write-up, letting the numbers speak for themselves. In contrast, in reports written by naturalistic researchers the voices and interpretations of the interviewees are more prominent. Because researchers acknowledge that they have influenced the results, they describe their own roles, often write in the first person, and accept the subjectivity of what they report. The attitude is more likely to be, "This is what I found" than "This is the way it is."

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE DIFFERENCES IN PRACTICE

How would you approach a given research problem from each of the two different paradigms? Assume that you are employed by a nonprofit

organization that has worked for years to provide poor people with affordable housing. The funding agencies have indicated that they are pleased with the number of homes your organization has built, but they want to learn about the impact of those homes on those who live there before renewing the grants that support your organization's housing program.

Following the positivist approach, you would construct a survey to administer to randomly selected households in two groups: those your organization has helped and others in the same neighborhood who are not involved with your organization. You ask the same questions of everyone you survey: how much they earn, how much housing costs them now and how much it cost in the past, and how long they have lived where they now live. You also ascertain the age of the housing, its size, how many modern amenities it has, and similar indicators of housing quality. You might then ask people to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 their degree of satisfaction with their housing, the safety of the neighborhood, the ease of getting jobs, and their children's access to schools or playgrounds.

Positivists and most naturalistic researchers would accept as meaningful the statistics on the average costs of housing and those on the length of time people have lived in their present locations. However, naturalistic researchers might question whether individuals would understand the question about housing satisfaction the same way. Some may be easily satisfied and others hard to please—they might rate the same housing improvements differently. A response of 3 from one person might be equivalent to a response of 5 from someone else. And what does it mean to get a job more easily? Does it mean more quickly? Does it mean easier to reach by public transportation? Does it mean easier to get a good job, or any job at all? To the naturalist, it would not be clear what the respondents meant if they said yes, it was easier now to get a good job. In addition, the naturalist might question whether the survey included questions on program participants' most important concerns.

At this point, the naturalist would probably shift into in-depth interviews, first asking program participants about their experiences and then guiding interviewees to reflect on what the change in housing has meant to them, the pros and cons of the move, without imposing the precise topics to be covered. Some of what is discussed might be the same topics that were on the survey, though discussed in more detail. Your interviewees might say that their children are getting a better education, then add that their kids are doing better in school, that they have more friends and seem happier now that they don't have to move so often. And the teachers seem to know the kids better and can help them when they have problems with school work. Or perhaps the less structured interviews would lead to unanticipated insights. For instance, you might discover that those who bought homes from your organization gained the self-confidence needed to join a neighborhood group that works to keep their communities safe. To those helped by the program, the improved housing was as much about self-respect and empowerment as it was about having more space, better appliances, and more stability. You probably would not have thought about asking about this broader impact if you hadn't let people tell you what was important to them.

Which approach is better and more appropriate? The answer in this case is probably that both are necessary and useful; they supplement each other, especially if the survey and the in-depth interviews were done separately, each following the assumptions of its own paradigm.

VARIATIONS ON THE CORE PARADIGMS

Both positivist and naturalist paradigms have important variants that modify them to some extent.

Positivism Yields to Postpositivism

Postpositivism is both a spin-off of positivism and a reaction to it. Positivists presuppose that knowledge is politically and socially neutral and can be obtained with quantitative precision through an accumulation of facts that build a close approximation to a reality that exists independently of human perception. The purpose of research is to discover universal truths. Postpositivists argue that one can never be certain that the theory is actually true, only that it hasn't yet been proven false (Willis, Jost, & Nilakanta, 2007, p. 73).

Positivists assume that data can be collected independent of the social or political perspectives of the researcher, while postpositivists acknowledge that all data gathering is impacted to some extent by preexisting social or political theories (Willis et al., 2007, p. 73). Postpositivists seem somewhat less sure than classical positivists that it is always possible to separate the knower from the known and that there is a single shared reality which excludes all others. As such, postpositivists have moved a little in the direction of the naturalists to argue that total neutrality of the researcher is not possible and that there may not always be a single reality that is acknowledged by and shared by all.

Naturalist and Interpretive Constructionist Perspectives

The naturalist paradigm emphasizes the importance of context, of complexity, of examining situations in which many factors interact. Within the naturalist paradigm, one school, ***interpretive constructionism,*** argues that the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them, how people interpret what they encounter, and how they assign meanings and values to events or objects.

To interpretive constructionist researchers, how people view an object or event and the meaning that they attribute to it are what is important. It matters less whether a chair is 36 inches high and 87 years old than that one person perceives it as an antique and another views it as junk. Interpretive constructionists understand that people look at matters through distinct lenses and reach somewhat different conclusions. Multiple, apparently conflicting versions of the same event or object can be true at the same time. The person who calls a wooden chair an antique is no more correct than the person who views it as junk; he or she just comes to the chair with different experiences, knowledge, and perspectives.

Constructionists are concerned with the lenses through which people view events, the expectations and meanings that they bring to a situation. Constructionists believe that groups of people create and then share understandings with each other. Children may learn the meaning of *antique* from their parents or in a museum if they try to sit on a very old chair and the museum guard shoos them away. The meaning may be passed along in books with pictures of particular chairs and their prices. Constructionists argue that *antique* is not an objective thing with measurable qualities, such as age, but a designation given by people to an object that makes it meaningful (and expensive) for them.

By living and working together or routinely interacting in a neighborhood or profession, people come to share some meanings, common

ways of judging things (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, p. 172). Nurses in a cardiac rehabilitation unit may construct and hold a shared idea of a typical patient as one who eats unhealthy food and who is reluctant to exercise. Street vendors of magazines, many of whom are homeless, together form a cultural group in which they share meanings and form common understandings. Though the city ordinances define the situation otherwise, within their shared culture the street vendors do not see it as theft when they take and resell the recyclables people have put out at the curb for municipal pickup (Duneier, 1999). Constructionists try to elicit the interviewees' views of their worlds, their work, and the events they have experienced or observed.

Cultural lenses that people use to interpret situations are often taken for granted and, as such, become invisible (Schutz, 1967, p. 74). As a consequence, it is difficult for researchers to directly ask about culture. Instead, researchers have to ask about ordinary events and deduce the underlying rules or definitions from these descriptions, paying particular attention to the ways words are used and to the stories that convey cultural assumptions.

It is not only the people studied who have cultural lenses; researchers do too. These lenses affect what they can see, what they look for, what questions they ask. As a result, interpretative constructionists emphasize self-awareness; they spend time examining their own assumptions and making them apparent to themselves and ultimately to the readers of their work.

The ability to get into the world of someone who does not share one's own lenses requires an ability to recognize and then suspend one's own cultural assumptions long enough to see and understand another's (Gergen, 1999, p. 50). In this model, you don't have to be neutral, but you do need to know what your biases are and how they may influence the research. You need to take steps to recognize your own expectations and learn how to listen to someone whose understandings are radically different from your own.

Critical, Feminist, and Postmodern Perspectives

A number of other research approaches offer variations of the naturalist and interpretative constructionist paradigm. We will limit our discussion to ideas from these alternative philosophies that have influenced our model of responsive interviewing.

The Critical Perspective

The critical perspective maintains that the purpose of research should be discovery and remediation of societal problems (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). Rather than advocating neutrality, critical researchers emphasize action research, arguing that research should redress past oppression; bring problems to light; and help minorities, the poor, the powerless, and the silenced. With this approach, knowledge is considered subjective, depending on whose perspective you take and whose eyes view it. This form of subjectivity is called *standpoint theory* because it emphasizes whose point of view you are taking.

Critical researchers explicitly take sides by giving voice to underdog groups, those sidelined by society, or those made invisible to the public. They study victims of crimes; migrant workers; people confined in mental institutions or prisons; AIDS patients, their lovers, and their advocates; political and social minorities; and the disabled. They give voice to the unemployed, the downwardly mobile, those who do the dirty work of

the society or clean up others' messes. Critical researchers examine the accomplishments of the oppressed that others ignore.

Those who follow the critical paradigm document the tools of oppression and repression, including police brutality, censorship, twisted justice systems, social isolation, and various forms of bullying. They look at the consequences for the individuals and for the society. Critical researchers argue that research should lead to action to reduce the problems caused by oppression by connecting "the everyday troubles individuals face to public issues of power, justice, and democracy" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 289).

Feminism

As part of the critical perspective, feminist researchers pay particularly close attention to issues of dominance and submission, especially when gender is involved. While some feminist researchers design surveys consistent with a feminist approach, many have been more comfortable with qualitative interviews that allow the interviewees to talk back, to challenge cultural assumptions embedded in the questions, and to answer from their own experience. Allowing people to "talk back" is a political act (hooks, 1989) that gives a voice to those who have been silenced. Feminist methodology is generally gentle; the interviewer takes pains not to dominate the interviewee and works to build a relationship—often a real friendship—with the interviewee. Interviewer and interviewee share responsibility for working out the ways in which ideas can be expressed and women's lives described.

Feminist research emphasizes the importance of cultural affinity between the researcher and the conversational partner; some feminist researchers claim not only that women should interview women but also that interviewers need to be in the same position as the interviewees. For example, adult students with children should interview other adult students with children.

Postmodernism

Researchers who identify themselves as postmodernist also reject much of positivism. Postmodernism assumes that reality is not fully knowable and that truth is impossible to define. At the extreme, some postmodernists worry that nothing at all can be known and claim that the best that researchers can accomplish is to allow people to share experiences and feelings with one another. Postmodernists argue that neutrality is impossible because everyone has interests and attitudes that influence how topics are selected, what questions are asked, and what means of analysis are considered appropriate. Like snowflakes, no two researchers are exactly alike, so the conclusions reached by different researchers are unlikely to match.

Rather than accept that there is one correct view as the positivists do, postmodernists argue that the researcher's view is only one among many and has no more legitimacy than the views of the people being studied. It is important, therefore, to present a range of views and conclusions in as raw a fashion as possible—that is, in the words of the speakers, with little interpretive overlay. Because the author's voice is not privileged, some postmodernists argue that only the interviewees' voices should be presented through unedited videotapes or transcripts of recordings of what was said (Atkinson, 2001; Denzin, 1997; Gergen, 1999; Schwandt, 1999; Schwandt, 2000).

Some of the major differences between positivism and naturalism and its variants are summarized in Chart 2.1.

CHART 2.1 Positivism, Naturalism, and Its Variants

Topic: The Nature of Reality	
Positivist	There is a single, uniform reality that researchers attempt to measure in a precise, objective, and neutral manner.
Postpositivist slant	In some cases, there may not be a single, external truth.
Interpretive Constructionist (Naturalistic)	Meanings and understandings are plural; individuals and groups see and interpret reality through their own lenses. Understanding is subjective.
Feminist slant	Reality is interpreted through gendered lenses, often in ways that reflect existing male/female hierarchies.
Critical slant	Reality has been interpreted in ways that preserve structures of dominance.
Topic: Types of Knowledge Sought	
Positivist	The goal is to obtain theories that are (nearly) universal in their implications. Usually uses quantitative measures to show relationship between a small number of variables abstracted from context. Looking for general tendencies, often ignores the particular.
Postpositivist slant	Since one cannot prove that a theory is absolutely true, postpositivists are more tentative in their conclusions than classical positivists.
Interpretive Constructionist (Naturalistic)	The goal is to describe particular events, processes, or culture from the perspective of the participants, usually using qualitative techniques. Specifies the conditions under which themes seem to hold. Interested in contending and overlapping versions of reality; many truths possible.
Feminist slant	Emphasis is on how gender relations and gender dominance impact social behaviors.
Critical slant	Learns about structures of dominance to work out ways of reducing them.

(Continued)

CHART 2.1 (Continued)

Topic: The Role of the Researcher	
Positivist	Neutral-objective person with an authoritative voice in write-up.
Postpositivist slant	It is not possible to be absolutely neutral.
Interpretive Constructionist (Naturalistic)	A respectful listener or observer of other peoples' worlds who recognizes that his or her own slant affects what is learned; less authoritative in write-up than positivists, leaves more room for participants' contending or overlapping views.
Feminist slant	A respectful listener or observer who is empathetic toward those being studied.
Critical slant	A social activist seeking information required to repair social inequities.
Topic: Implications of Findings	
Positivist	Data gathering is meant to move toward universal theories and prediction of behavior; information can be used in practice, but that is not the core purpose of research.
Interpretive Constructionist (Naturalistic)	Descriptions and analysis foster understanding of political, social, and cultural processes and practices; may be relevant to theory or may be the basis of proposed action.
Feminist slant	Research is undertaken to increase understanding of gender-based differences and dominance patterns, usually with the goal of reducing gender-based inequalities.
Critical slant	Research is undertaken to describe and explain inequities and injustice and then to provide a guide for social activism.

TOWARD THE RESPONSIVE INTERVIEWING MODEL

In this chapter, we have described two major social research paradigms—sets of assumptions that frame research, define what is important, indicate what can be learned, and instruct researchers on how to conduct studies. While we have worked in both the positivist and the naturalistic–interpretive–constructionist paradigms, for most of our research we have relied on responsive interviewing, a technique consistent with the interpretive constructionist variant of the naturalist paradigm.

For us, the positivist model seems unrealistic because it abstracts a few factors and looks at them as if they were all that was happening, when in fact reality is more complex and interesting. We find the richness, depth, and subtlety

obtained through qualitative work more satisfying. Responsive interviewing allows us to explore new areas and to suggest theories and interpretations of our own. Moreover, the challenge of thinking on our feet has been addictive.

We have been influenced in our work by the critical and feminist variants of the naturalistic paradigm. We feel that studies of invisible people, the underdog, and the ordinary Jane and Joe not only fill in missing pieces of history and social life but can give voice to the voiceless. The critical perspective has made us aware of the possibility of using research results to address social problems and encourage reforms. We agree with feminist researchers that interviews should be gentle and, when possible, enjoyable. Like feminist researchers, we emphasize both the importance of creating a relationship with those being researched and the need to make room for unexpected interpretations. However, we do not agree that research should be done only to study underdogs variously defined, or that researchers must be socially similar to those they study in order to understand them. A crucial advantage of responsive interviewing—in fact, of almost all naturalistic research—is that researchers can learn to understand the lives and experiences of people very different from themselves.

In the next chapter, we describe our responsive interviewing model in more detail, situating it within the broader set of naturalistic data-gathering techniques.