# Introduction

## Charles Vanover, Paul Mihas, and Johnny Saldaña

Analyzing and Interpreting Qualitative Research: After the Interview provides readers with practices and strategies for transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting interview data, whether from individual one-on-one sessions, focus groups, or secondary sources. Our goal is to provide a versatile how-to guide on these phases of the qualitative research life cycle. We offer a rich assortment of approaches to guide readers from the conclusion of substantial fieldwork to formal research writing.

Rather than sharing a single, unitary perspective on how to move from a recorded set of interviews to dissertation chapters, articles, and books, we have asked some of the leaders in the field of qualitative research to provide step-by-step accounts of their efforts to engage in different forms of data analysis. Our contributors' perspectives are as diverse as the field of qualitative studies, but one commonality runs through each text: Every chapter in this book celebrates the role researcher decision-making plays in skilled inquiry. Because every research question is unique and each set of interviews may be interpreted in multiple ways, there is no established pathway that will lead from a set of recorded conversations to a finished qualitative study. Researchers have provided guidance on how to engage in data analysis (e.g., Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016; Galman, 2016; Gee, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2011; Silverman, 2000), but there is no indisputable protocol that will lead to an optimal result.

Qualitative researchers must use and refine their judgment during each phase of the qualitative research life cycle. The goals we attempt to achieve and the questions we ask shape the practices we use to transform copious data into formal research writing. The decision to use a particular epistemological frame or theoretical lens shapes the questions we ask and the insights gained from their inquiry. Different theories generate different questions, and original questions can produce unexpected findings and unanticipated approaches to getting there.

Analysis and interpretation are, to some degree, separable. Analyzing data refers to a close reading of data, an examination of the component parts, listening and relistening to what we have gathered, and using practices, such as coding and memo writing, to systematically discern what we are reading, based on a priori knowledge or what one might call "emergent" discernment. Interpreting data refers to conceptualizing or making larger meaning of what we have examined. Here, we tell the meta-story, or build themes that tie together the seemingly disparate

threads across data. Though the lines between analysis and interpretation can be blurred, we point to their differences to better understand the incremental shifts in the qualitative research life cycle, how we move from fragments to wholes.

The meaning of a set of interviews is constructed through care and practice—through the researcher's decisions and practices, which can be emergent as options for analysis become evident in early data review. Researchers arguably make meaning early in the research life cycle. As Charles Vanover, in Chapter 4, describes, a researcher's decision to use a particular set of transcription practices shapes their moment-to-moment understanding as they engage with prepared interview text during subsequent phases of inquiry. Some transcription practices may highlight participants' gestures and tones of voice while others erase these dimensions (Bartesaghi, Chapter 5). As data analysis progresses, different practices focus researchers' attention on distinct aspects of the interview content. No piece of recorded dialogue has an innate meaning. Discovering what matters most within a particular data set may be a complex and nonlinear process. Kakali Bhattacharya, Chapter 21, describes her efforts to use a set of contemplative and arts-based practices to bring "forward multiple elements of the interview that had a strong pull" and to investigate the "reasons for this pull."

Reflexive planning and decision making are critical during each stage of the qualitative research life cycle (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). Sometimes it is best to follow the original research design and perform each step of the analysis in the order the research efforts were planned. In other situations, the best choice may be to modify the original questions or choose to engage in forms of analysis that better fit the collected data (Bingham & Witkowsky, Chapter 8; Blanco & Rossman, Chapter 1). Such decision points cannot always be specified in advance. Skilled qualitative researchers perform their work with a profound understanding of the goals of their inquiry and a deep knowledge of the potential methods and range of practices they might apply.

Qualitative research is a democratic practice. Diversity in methods and approaches adds to the analytical richness of our field. There are numerous points of departure for data analysis and ways to organize interviews, videos, and research memos. Some of the authors in this volume argue for the careful use of qualitative data analysis software to organize and structure researchers' interactions with interview data (di Gregorio, Chapter 6; Larbi-Cherif, Egan, & Glazer, Chapter 17; Lester & Paulus, Chapter 2; Turner, Chapter 7). Other contributors emphasize the benefits of taking the time to develop insights through the use of writing practices such as memos and note cards (Fiddler, Chapter 16; Keane, Chapter 15; Mihas, Chapter 14). Transcription may be understood as a critical step in the analytic process (Bartesaghi, Chapter 5; Vanover, Chapter 4), or a practice that might be disregarded in favor of direct interaction with audio and video files (Bernauer, Chapter 10). Many of the contributors to *Analyzing and Interpreting Qualitative Research* describe the worth and challenges of different coding practices. Janet Richards, in Chapter 9, describes the use of thematic analysis to find commonality

and diversity within a set of field notes. Andrea Bingham and Patricia Witkowsky, in Chapter 8, discuss combining theory-based and inductive approaches to coding. Their chapter provides examples of how to use deductive practices to sort and organize data and how to move to inductive practices to identify unanticipated topics, themes, and meaningful findings that connect data to theory and other concepts from the research literature. Adrian Larbi-Cherif, Cori Egan, and Joshua L. Glazer, in Chapter 17, describe their research team's efforts to investigate a school district reform process by coding 157 interviews taken over multiple waves of data collection. Elsa M. Gonzalez and Yvonna S. Lincoln, in Chapter 12, describe the challenges of coding interview data across languages and cultures.

Decision-making does not end at the conclusion of analytic work. Interpretation, synthesis, and write up require careful planning and further decision making. Some qualitative studies might be better rendered as collages, plays, films, and/or poems than as formal research reports. Arts-based practices might be engaged to interpret the data and communicate the study's meanings in moving and expressive ways (Bhattacharya, Chapter 21; Campbell Galman, Chapter 22; Saldaña, Chapter 19; Shenfield & Prendergast, Chapter 20). The insights produced by the use of arts-based practices might enrich the study's findings even if the researcher's poems, plays, comics, and/or drawings are never published. When arts-based practices are used skillfully to produce a provocative work of art, researchers gain the power to strike the imagination and speak directly to the public. A piece of art or performance of "high aesthetic quality has the potential to engage audiences emotionally and communally" (Saldaña, 2018, p. 374). Such is rarely the case with academic journal articles.

Qualitative researchers may choose to use a wide range of write-up practices. Tim Huffman, in Chapter 18, discusses how to develop claims from a qualitative analysis and how to use these assertions to create arguments about the issues that motivated the investigation. Jessica Smartt Gullion, in Chapter 24, discusses the practices and strategies researchers might use to engage in formal and informal forms of research writing such as concept papers and blog posts. Mitchell Allen, in Chapter 25, draws on his years of experience in publishing to discuss the choices and trade-offs researchers face when developing book-length manuscripts.

The meanings communicated by a set of qualitative data are not innate to the original recorded interaction. Meaning must be constructed through patient hours of practical work. This labor opens researchers' minds and hearts and allows them to communicate what they have learned to various audiences.

### Finding One's Way Through Qualitative Inquiry

Each of the editors comes to this work through years of commitment to qualitative inquiry. Charles Vanover entered the field of qualitative studies at the beginning of the twenty-first century by working as a graduate researcher on a set of mixed

methods studies similar to those described in Larbi-Cherif et al. (Chapter 17). What turned out to be most influential in his development, however, was Charles's membership in The Rackham Graduate School's Narrative Institute, a group of graduate students and faculty who established a set of monthly talks on narrative research. As these talks and meetings progressed, core members of the Narrative Institute made it a point to ask each presenter the same set of questions: "What did you do with the box of stuff you collected in the field? How did you transform the recordings, notebooks, and other items you produced during data collection into the completed book or set of articles we are discussing today?" The field of qualitative studies was just becoming digitized; researchers really did return from the field carrying boxes and suitcases filled with cassette tapes, rolls of film, stacks of note cards, and other materials.

Among graduate students at Michigan, it was common knowledge that the transition from fieldwork to data analysis was a perilous moment in the research process. Some of the richest conversations on method at the Narrative Institute revolved around the practical details of organizing and engaging with field material. Many of the researchers who presented their work had never been asked to share the particulars of how they transcribed their interviews or to discuss the techniques they used to interpret and write up their data. Many a cautionary tale was told, both at the Narrative Institute's formal sessions, and then at off-campus coffee shops and bars, about researchers who had returned from the field with high hopes and boxes filled with material, only to become lost in the data and to never find their way. It was said there were graduate students and senior faculty who completed their fieldwork, but who spent the rest of their careers circling through their data. Ideas might flow and descriptions grow thick, but chapters were never written, articles never submitted, and insights never disseminated.

Digital methods of data collection make this problem more complex by increasing the kinds of data available for analysis. Twentieth-century qualitative researchers were limited by the amount of field material they could carry or ship. Twenty-first century researchers have the resources to generate hour upon hour of digital audio and video files and to collect thousands of photographs, emails, and social media posts. Making informed decisions about how to organize and engage with this material and transform it into a completed research product is one of qualitative researchers' core competencies.

The second editor of this volume, Paul Mihas, first entered the realm of qualitative thinking when he taught a creative nonfiction writing course at Duke University Continuing Education in the 1990s. As the managing editor of a sociology journal, he was struck by how nonfiction could convey lived experience in evocative ways that were more memorable and more resonant than traditional academic writing. Survival stories and memoirs of crisis, in particular, caught his attention. He began collecting interview data on cancer survivors and focused on identities in transition, how survivors had their own way of making sense of their health challenges and retrieving suppressed selves. Metaphors—such as "cancer graduate"

and "cancer veteran"—taught him what "data driven" meant before he had even heard the term. As he moved into the role of qualitative research consultant at the Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, he met with countless graduate students struggling through data collection and analysis. Whenever he embarks on a new study, he is reminded of the unpredictable nature of the qualitative odyssey and, in a world pushing for data acceleration, how much we have to learn by slowing down and listening to the moment—language that provides glimpses into lived experience and sense-making.

Johnny Saldaña's qualitative research coursework started in spring 1995 and came from Arizona State University professors Tom Barone (introductory methods) and Mary Lee Smith (advanced methods). Barone lectured on the fundamentals of the paradigm then ventured into arts-based approaches such as narrative inquiry and performance ethnography. Smith focused on methodologies such as grounded theory and assertion development with an emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork. Later in his career Saldaña took additional coursework in communication and qualitative research with Sarah Amira De la Garza (intercultural ethnography) and Sarah J. Tracy (advanced qualitative data analysis). An eclectic array of course experiences developed an eclectic researcher. He experienced a range of approaches to inquiry from systematic data analysis to evocative arts-based approaches. He attests to this day that qualitative researchers should not pigeon-hole themselves into one methodology for their careers, but should instead be well-versed in *multiple* methods of inquiry and analytic practices. This knowledge base serves the researcher well, providing a cultivated repertoire of problem-solving heuristics.

# Assumptions About Qualitative Research and the Qualitative Research Life Cycle

The editors have organized this book around a set of assumptions about the goals and practices of qualitative research. As with all assumptions, some people may disagree with our views, including the contributors to this volume. Transparency and clarity are core virtues in qualitative inquiry. By sharing our assumptions, we hope to encourage researchers to approach the text from a reflexive perspective (Berger, 2015) and help those who question our perspectives to calibrate the editors' possible errors against the richness of the contributors' work.

Two primary assumptions guide our efforts. First, we believe qualitative research matters; asking people questions and disseminating the findings is a powerful engine for social change (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Second, we believe the skills necessary to do this work well can be learned through study and practice. What individuals say and do has value, whether those individuals are people who spend their days leading corporations, schools, or clinical care units (Benner, Hooper-Kyriakidis, & Stannard, 2011; Jackall, 1988; Wolcott, 1973) or whether they live and work in the margins (Behar, 2014; Bourgois, 2003; Finley, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The

editors acknowledge people's speech and actions can be recorded and studied, and engaging these data allows researchers to gain insight into experiences, worlds, and minds—knowledge that is usable by academicians, clinicians, practitioners, and others. There is never a best way to interpret an interview, but researchers can do a better or worse job of understanding and communicating content and layers of meaning.

It is the editors' hope that one route researchers might take to do better is to refine their judgment as they skillfully deploy the methods and practices described in this book. However, technique is not the sole foundation of beneficial qualitative inquiry. Qualitative research is an ethical and emancipatory practice; the values displayed in and communicated by the work matter. Racist, homophobic, and sexist work, whether intentional or unconscious, cannot be described as successful, regardless of how careful the transcriptions or meticulous the coding system. Qualitative research must serve a politics of hope (Charmaz, 2017; Denzin & Giardina, 2009). There is no separate chapter on research ethics in this book, because all research decisions must follow from ethical principles regarding trustworthiness, diversity, equity, and inclusion (Christians, 2000).

Throughout the book we use the term the *qualitative research life cycle* to express the idea that qualitative research tends to have distinct and evolving stages. There is typically a research design stage where we consult literature, develop a conceptual framework, refine research questions, plan fieldwork, and develop interview and observation instruments (see Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leavy, 2017; Saldaña, 2014; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009 for descriptions of this work).

Once the design is in place, the grant is funded, the committee signs off, and the local internal review board accepts the data collection plan, the study moves from planning to action. Fieldwork begins. Researchers travel to another country, city, or their local neighborhood and observe what people say and do and take notes on these activities. They set up face-to-face interviews or they arrange for virtual encounters. Researchers take photographs, observe, or join in arts events, investigate community members' efforts to respond to a crisis, or partner with other people to change their corner of the world.

Eventually, the work changes as researchers return to their homes or spend more time at their favorite coffee shops. They begin to focus their efforts on analyzing data rather than collecting new information. During this stage of the qualitative research life cycle, researchers prepare transcripts, write memos, code data, or engage in other practices that help them organize and understand the material they have collected. Sometimes the researcher does most of this work on their own. Sometimes analysis and writing are organized around participatory, community-based practices. The end product might be a book, a play, or a project website, but the hope is findings will be shared and people will learn through and from the inquiry and the knowledge the study builds will be transformational, not simply transactional. Qualitative research is not navel gazing; it is active intervention into an unjust world.

#### **TABLE 1** ● Project Glossary

#### The Qualitative Research Life Cycle

The Qualitative Research Life Cycle begins with a design stage, which can incorporate a theoretical or conceptual framework, then moves to data collection, analysis, interpretation, research products, and dissemination. In some cases, the process is iterative, circular, and emergent, with data collection and analysis informing another stage of data collection. Thus, questions that arise in analysis might lead to another round of interviews, and research products developed earlier in the investigation might be reanalyzed or reinterpreted.

**Theory:** A theory presents linked concepts that explain types, structures, conditions, processes, outcomes, or other abstractions based on previous research or constructed during the course of analysis and interpretation. Qualitative research can begin with theory and/or contribute to theory development. Some theories are explicit and may be learned or demonstrated through instruction; other theories are implicit and are particularly subject to interrogation (see Milner, 2007; Scheurich & Young, 1997).

**Analysis:** Analysis refers to the detailed examination of data, both at the micro-level of textual excerpts and the holistic level of transcripts (e.g., coding text segments, writing memos on transcripts). Analysis is comprised of, most often, methodical and systematic practices, yet can also consist of intuitive and creative approaches.

**Interpretation:** Interpretation refers to making meaning of data based on analysis. It can include conceptualizing, thematizing, or other forms of synthesis presenting a condensed understanding across data sources.

**Theme:** A theme is an often-abstract characteristic or pattern of the phenomena or topic of investigation. Themes are constructed or identified during analysis and interpretation using codes, categories, data, memos, and demographic characteristics. That is, themes synthesize pieces of the analysis into a more presentable and meaningful whole.

**Levels of Inquiry:** Levels of inquiry (Vagle, 2018) refer to the layers of investigation that researchers knowingly or unknowingly activate in their work. These include assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge acquisition as well as research traditions and methods that align with these onto-epistemological paradigms. Aligning these levels of inquiry means ensuring that the research approach fits the larger paradigm and the methods that follow will provide the data best suited to answer the research question.

**World views/Paradigms:** World views or paradigms refer to ontological/epistemological philosophies and assumptions that underpin qualitative traditions (e.g., constructivism, critical social theory).

**Approaches/Traditions:** Qualitative approaches or traditions refer to established sets of data collection and analytical practices and strategies that form a coherent system of study (e.g., grounded theory, ethnography).

**Methods:** Methods refer to specific tools for data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups, participant observation).

**Practices:** Practices refer to specific analytical or data-engagement tasks (e.g., in vivo coding, constructing themes).

**Strategies:** Strategies refer to practices used for a particular analytic purpose (e.g., using codes and memos to construct themes, using key quotations to develop poems).

In the glossary in Table 1, the editors present their understanding of particular definitions of key terms used across chapters, though they have allowed authors to use their own perspective regarding these terms.

#### **Blurred Boundaries and Informed Decisions**

The stages of the qualitative research life cycle are not always distinct. Fieldwork, analysis, and interpretive meaning making may follow a reverberative rather than linear logic, and one stage may merge with another. Blurred boundaries may produce powerful research. Aishath Nasheeda, Haslinda Binti Abdullah, Steven Eric Krauss, and Nobaya Binti Ahmed, in Chapter 23, describe how questions about the meaning of research participants' interviews might be resolved, not through the use of various analytic and interpretive strategies, but by reinterviewing participants and asking them to comment on issues raised by their interview narrative. Craig M. McGill, Drew Puroway, and Mark Duslak, in Chapter 13, describe how recordings of data analysis meetings may become data to be analyzed. Sheryl L. Chatfield, in Chapter 3, describes how questions and research designs can be developed after the interview was conducted when researchers choose to use archived qualitative data. Alyson Welker and George Kamberelis, in Chapter 11, emphasize that data analysis may always remain incomplete. There are always new linkages and connections researchers might use to enrich the maps they create from their data.

Such blurred boundaries and nonlinear processes highlight the importance of researchers' ability to envision the end in mind and to organize inquiry to support the project's goals. One of the primary purposes of this book is to help readers increase their methodological literacy. We hope each chapter will help readers deepen the frames they use to guide their investigations or give them guidance on how to change their perspectives (see Bhattacharya, Chapter 21; Blanco & Rossman, Chapter 1). The section on transcription is intended to help readers decide how to best transcribe their interviews while the chapters by Jaime Fiddler (Chapter 16) and James A. Bernauer (Chapter 10) might support readers who decide to work directly from the recorded data. The range of coding practices we present (Bingham & Witkowsky, Chapter 8; Gonzalez & Lincoln, Chapter 12; Larbi-Cherif et al., Chapter 17; Turner, Chapter 7) can help readers compare research participants' experiences and develop analytic products that might be published in later phases of inquiry. We hope the discussions on memoing and other writing strategies (Fiddler, Chapter 16; Keane, Chapter 15; Mihas, Chapter 14; Welker & Kamberelis, Chapter 11) inspire readers to develop a system for recording their musings and make analytic connections within and across interviews. The sections on arts- and text-based communications practices are intended to broaden the range of strategies researchers use to interpret data and disseminate findings.

Qualitative research is a big tent with many performers (Tracy, 2010). We hope our book will inspire readers to step out of the audience and walk the tight rope and leap for the trapeze.

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