

Analyzing Qualitative Data

PART I

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Introduction

Analyzing Life

Learning Objectives

After reading and reviewing this chapter, researchers should be able to

1. Define analysis and qualitative research,
2. List and describe five basic qualitative data analysis skills, and
3. Discuss how analysis is a continuous process throughout a qualitative research study.

Introduction

Analysis (all bolded terms appear in the glossary) is the through-line for this introduction to qualitative research because we believe it is one of the least emphasized and thus most misunderstood facets of social inquiry. Willis (2015) defines analysis as “the series of steps that occur between data collection and the communication of results” (p. 56), but we rather assert that analysis begins at the very moment a researcher first conceives an idea for a study. Instead of some obligatory front matter that discusses why research is important or that surveys the history of the field, we focus on developing analytic skill sets as the first activity in the first section of this first chapter. It is important to develop these foundational skills early because the better researchers are at them from the very beginning, the better prepared they’ll be for managing and reflecting on **data** collected throughout the study. Most qualitative data are

documentation of what people say, do, write, and create. We discuss how analysis integrates with other essential research-related matters as chapters progress.

Developing Fundamental Qualitative Analytic Skills

Five of the most fundamental and critical analytic skills qualitative researchers and data analysts employ are

1. Condensing large amounts of data;
2. Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials;
3. Unifying seemingly different things;
4. Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction;
and
5. Interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life.

Qualitative analysis is an active process with one's mind and body to find patterns in data and to articulate their interrelationships. It draws on researchers' abilities to synthesize the various facets of what they have observed and to reconfigure them into new formulations of meaning.

We offer some brief explanations and a few simulation exercises to acquaint beginning researchers with these necessary skills. First, purely for introductory purposes, we define **qualitative research** as an umbrella term for

a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The information or data collected and analyzed is primarily (but not exclusively) non-quantitative in character, consisting of textual materials such as interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and/or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings, and Internet sites, that document human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states. (Saldaña, 2011b, pp. 3–4)

If human experiences are the primary focus for investigation, then the researchers' primary focus should be the analysis of human actions and their meanings.

Condensing large amounts of data

Qualitative researchers work with large collections of purposely gathered narrative and visual data, sometimes called **empirical materials**. Condensing large amounts of data is a necessary analytic task because a writer cannot report to readers absolutely everything gathered during the investigation. Researchers present selected facets of the inquiry that relate directly to the research question of interest, that they determine to be the most important information for others to know, and that provide sufficient evidence for their analytic claims. Also, individual researchers or even

multiple-member research teams cannot possibly keep every single **datum** (the singular form of data) coherently organized and accessible in their heads. The human mind, even with the help of computers, can retain only so much information. Human brains are hardwired to summarize and symbolize vast amounts of information in order to work more efficiently. “This ability to digest large amounts of information by breaking it into smaller pieces is how our brains turn information into knowledge” (Duhigg, 2016, pp. 245–246). Qualitative data analysis capitalizes on how humans naturally think.

We use the board game *Three for All!* (the commercial version of the psychological Remote Associates Test) as a playful analogy for what we do with qualitative data analysis and for developing analytic skills. A round of *Three for All!* presents three clues to a player, and not only must she guess the answers to the clues, she must also determine what the three answers share in common. For example, below is a clue for a word or phrase we’re prompting you to say out loud:

“You put two, sometimes four slices of bread in this thing and push the handle down to make the bread hot and crispy.”

Hopefully you said “toaster.” What you just did was condense a long description into a shorter form. You took a 23-word datum and assigned it a one-word symbolic representation, or a descriptive **code**. Here’s another clue; determine what we’re describing:

“You put liquids and stuff in this thing and then push a button and it swirls fast and mixes everything up.”

You might have thought of a “food processor.” And while that response would be correct, given the information or data we gave you, it’s not the most appropriate answer or code because it’s not what we originally had in mind. So, we’ll have to provide additional information and more reflection time to steer you toward a more appropriate response:

“You make drinks like margaritas and milk shakes and smoothies in this thing.”

Perhaps your next answer is “blender.” That would be the better response or code. The lessons: sometimes both responses or perspectives can be valid, sometimes you need to consider multiple options before selecting the most appropriate one, and sometimes certain condensed forms of meaning are better or more precise than others.

Here’s a third clue/datum:

“You put ground coffee and water in this thing and it heats up and it makes a hot beverage.”

But we have made an error. We were not supposed to say the words “coffee” or “makes” in our clue because, according to *Three for All!* rules, we’re not allowed to say the actual answer in our description. But it’s too late to take it back. You’ve been given an advantage with our description and you give us the correct answer: “coffeemaker.” But this is a teachable moment. There will be times when the symbol or code you create for a datum can employ a word or two from the datum itself. This is a method called **In Vivo Coding** (discussed further in Chapter 5). Sometimes, the people we interview provide rich insights with their own words, better than we could ever compose.

A round of *Three for All!* provides you with three different clues, and you must generate a separate answer for each prompt. Condense these sets of data into shorter codes:

1. “This has got Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Genesis, and Revelation in it.”
2. “This has a lot of words in alphabetical order along with their definitions in it.”
3. “This has a lot of names of people who live in a city, their home addresses, phone numbers, area codes, and it’s got yellow pages in it.”

Do you want the correct answers now to make sure you got them right? We could provide them, but that’s not always how qualitative data analysis works. If an individual researcher is to condense large amounts of data into shorter forms, she must rely on her own best judgment to determine if she has gotten it right. Two or more researchers might work collaboratively on coding the data to better ensure consistency of interpretations—a form of **intercoder agreement**. Sometimes researchers can go back to the people who originally supplied the data to ask for their feedback and verification but, more often than not, researchers take responsibility for their analytic coding assignments. If they feel confident with their choices, that’s a good intuitive sign. Nothing is set in stone—researchers can always revise a code later if new information suggests a reanalysis of their initial assignments is in order.

Analyzing life, in part, sometimes consists of symbolizing or condensing what people say about their perceptions and experiences into essences. Review the following interview quotations from participants and, just as with the *Three for All!* example above, determine what word or words you would use to capture the meaning of each. Try to go beyond the topic, usually phrased as a noun, and label the content as an action-oriented **Process Code** or gerund (a gerund is an “-ing” word/phrase such as reflecting, praising accomplishments, complaining about pain).

1. “You can’t trust politicians. Once they get elected, they go back on their campaign promises and do the opposite of what they said they’d do. And it’s just to get votes; they don’t really care about people.”
2. “Being a parent is hard. You’re worried about your children; even when they’re fully grown and on their own, you still want to know if they’re doing

OK. You can e-mail and Facebook all you want, but you still need to see it in their faces, you know?”

3. “I’m paying about \$500 a year in co-pays for prescription medications. I looked at the total and thought, ‘When did that happen? When did I start needing so much medicine to live my life?’”

You might have found it quite difficult to find just the right Process Codes to symbolize the essences of these quotations. Unlike quantitative research with its standardized formulas to generate statistical answers, qualitative inquiry relies on researchers’ creative thinking and **heuristics**—methods of discovery—to generate comparable findings. Solid quantitative reasoning relies on numeric accuracy. In qualitative research, precision rests with researchers’ word choices.

In sum, an essential qualitative data analytic skill is the ability to condense large amounts of data into briefer summarized forms. Condensed data do not always have to take the form of codes; other summative forms such as categories and sentence-length themes are possible. Also, summation can range from condensing a 30-page interview transcript into 10 pages of the most important or relevant passages, to analyzing only a 5-minute segment of a 30-minute video because the excerpt seems to capture the richest portion of the total social interaction. We discuss more on these analytic principles later. For now, we examine a second critical skill.

Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials

Patterns are human constructions and concepts: we notice repetition in human actions and thus label them as routines, rituals, or rules. Roles and relationships (e.g., parent–child, customer–salesperson, citizen–government) also maintain repetitive actions according to function and purpose. This repetition or pattern-making, assuming it consists of constructive purposes, helps humans feel secure and provides a sense of social order and continuity to daily life. People do most things over and over out of need, habit, adherence to tradition, responsibility, socialization, or because the routine has proved to generate successful results. Sometimes, though, patterns can consist of bad habits or destructive actions such as addiction to prescription drugs or constant belittling of a spouse. But noticing these is important, too. When individuals are aware of what’s working and what is not, they can hopefully take positive action to rectify the wrongs and make a better self and world. Noticing patterns gets researchers closer to finding answers about the human condition—that is, why people do the things they do.

Let’s return to the *Three for All!* game to review pattern construction. In the most recent round, we prompted you to respond to this clue: “This has got Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Genesis, and Revelation in it.” Hopefully the clue and your background knowledge were sufficient enough to generate the answer, “the Bible.” One answer or datum is a good thing, but reliable or credible conclusions cannot be drawn from just one facet of knowledge. Thus, we need more observations and answers to construct a pattern in progress.

The second clue prompts, “This has a lot of words in alphabetical order along with their definitions in it.” Again, hopefully the clue and your background knowledge were sufficient to generate the answer, “a dictionary.” A pattern, as we define it, starts to form when something repeats more than twice in the data. Thus, your goal in the game is to start formulating what the Bible and a dictionary might have in common—the characteristics or qualities they share. Your mind is imaging them and reflecting on their constituent elements or **properties**: they both have bound pages with words on them, for example. You also might brainstorm answers such as, “They’re online books” or “They’re reference books.” But as you reflect on how or what they might have in common, you conclude that the Bible is not considered a reference book, so you eliminate that answer as a possibility—for now. And, yes, they are both accessible online through several platforms, but they are also published in hardback and paperback formats. More information is needed since the more repetitions, the more stable the pattern.

You now reflect on the third clue or datum: “This has a lot of names of people who live in a city, their home addresses, numbers, area codes, and it’s got yellow pages in it.” You have the answer but soon realize it might go by different names, from the colloquial “phone book” to the more formal “telephone directory” or even the overtly stated “yellow pages.” You keep all of these in mind for now. A specific name might or might not matter at this point, but at least you feel confident that you have the gist.

You now have comparable forms of data that occur more than twice, so you reflect on your three different answers: the Bible, a dictionary, and a telephone directory. The next goal of *Three for All!* is to propose what these three things have in common. In other words, what is the pattern that seems to emerge? Remember that several answers can all be correct in one way or another, but some answers and often just one of them, in your best judgment, might be more appropriate or credible than others. You could offer that what the Bible, a dictionary, and a telephone directory all have in common is that they all have pages, or that they’re all accessible online, or that they’re all things you can read, or that they all contain numbers, and so on. But the most seemingly appropriate answer you decide to put forth is, “They’re all books.”

If you came to that conclusion or deduction fairly quickly, that’s good. But what might have seemed like an obvious answer actually took a lot of cognitive processing to formulate. Your mind went through some sophisticated mental operations to arrive at the answer, and it’s important to know what some of these processes are because they’ll play a role as you continue qualitative analytic work. Briefly, four of these operations are as follows.

Induction is open-ended exploration of a problem, going into an inquiry to learn as you go, formulating answers as more information is compiled. Every sentence-length clue you received in the *Three for All!* simulations above prompted you to think inductively. Much of qualitative research is inductive inquiry or **analytic induction**, because researchers generally begin with open-ended questions for investigation rather than fixed hypotheses to test. Think of induction as on-the-job training in which one learns more and gets better at the tasks each day.

Substruction examines separate pieces and parts of the whole for more detailed analysis. Each one of the three answers you provided for a round of *Three for All!* (e.g., Bible, dictionary, telephone directory) needs to be considered on its own before you determine what the three share—that is, their pattern.

Abduction examines an array of possibilities in order to select the most likely, plausible, or best possibility. Any time you had more than one alternative, option, or answer to consider while playing *Three for All!* (e.g., a food processor or a blender; a phone book, telephone directory, or yellow pages) you exercised abductive thinking. Qualitative inquiry considers a range of participant perspectives and experiences, including the unexpected and anomalous. Researchers look at the totality of data to consider different possibilities for interpretation and, after careful analysis, put forth the one(s) that seem(s) most likely.

Deduction is a culminating process and product, derived from inductive, sub-structive, and/or abductive thinking. It is the conclusion drawn after considering all the evidence or data (e.g., “They’re all books”). Deductions come in various forms: some are summative statements like assertions, propositions, and theories. But deductions can also consist of smaller summaries (toaster, blender, coffeemaker) that accumulate into a more comprehensive deduction (they’re all small kitchen appliances).

After reading each *Three for All!* clue, you employed inductive thinking through your reflections on their contents. When you mentally brainstormed the possibilities of what they all shared in common, you utilized both substructive and abductive thinking. And when you formulated what the three things had in common, you thought deductively by constructing a pattern that unified them. Unifying or finding relationships among and between data is another essential analytic skill, discussed next.

Unifying seemingly different things

When you play *Three for All!*, the goal is to unify three things according to what they have in common. If our three prompts to you are butter, ice, and candle, what property do they share? They all melt.

Another facet of qualitative data analysis is constructing relationships between different condensed forms of data and the patterns observed. This goes beyond finding what different things have in common: it’s also unifying them in some way through the analysis and description of their **interrelationship** or how they connect. **Unity** is a design principle in which seemingly disparate things or elements harmonize. Unity is an aesthetic that suggests, “These things belong together, go together, or work together.” Qualitative research reports should also attempt to present a feeling of unity or coherence in their presentation. An abstract portrait (see Figure 1.1) can at first appear as a random, chaotic arrangement. But the artwork possesses unity because the varying shapes are all nonrealistic, fluid, and graphically bold.

Sometimes what unifies elements of a research study is that they are all distinct yet interrelated facets of the same experience or **phenomenon**. Saldaña’s (1997) first ethnographic study documented a white, female, beginning school teacher’s experiences

at a predominantly Hispanic school. Three main challenges she faced as a novice educator were (1) unfamiliarity with the young people's Spanish language, (2) the ethos or culture of urban youth, and (3) the gangs that maintained an active presence in the neighborhood. Language, ethos, and gangs were three major elements that contributed to and unified the experience of *cultural shock* (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) of this novice teacher's indoctrination into the profession.

Sometimes unity is achieved by connecting elements of an **analytic story-line** together. Qualitative researchers place great stock in process, meaning the story-lines or trajectories of human action. This might include marking the phases, stages, and/or cycles of the patterns observed. As an example, Saldaña conducted fieldwork in elementary schools to observe young people's emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Children's understanding of and vocabulary for emotions progresses from a core understanding at approximately ages 6 and 7 of such basic feelings they identify as happy, sad, mad, sly, sneaky, excited, and so on. Though one might expect a cumulatively smooth trajectory of emotional development as children grow older, that is not the case. Around age 9, most children go through *emotional ambivalence*, a developmental stage in which they experience new and complex emotions such as guilt, angst, and so on, yet they do not have the vocabulary to identify and thus describe their feelings. One child might say she experienced "a different kind of happy—a floating happy" to describe euphoria. By ages 11–12, their emotional vocabulary expands greatly to include such nuanced feelings they identify as caring, proud, confident, embarrassed, regretful, apprehensive, distraught, and envious. This developmental story of their *emotional literacy* compares various stages to illustrate change. Emotions unify this analytic story-line.

Another way to achieve unity in research is to find a central or **core category** that functions as an umbrella for all of the study's constituent elements. Kathy

FIGURE 1.1 ● This abstract artwork possesses unity (original in color).



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Charmaz, a key writer of grounded theory (explained in Chapter 6), explored how serious chronic illness affects the body and the identity of self. A core category she identified from her interviews with the physically impaired was *adapting*. Her analysis below explains the story or trajectory of adapting (a core Process Code) to physical impairment through time:

By adapting, I mean altering life and self to accommodate to physical losses and to reunify the body and self accordingly. Adapting implies that the individual acknowledges impairment and alters life and self in socially and personally acceptable ways. Bodily limits and social circumstances often force adapting to loss. Adapting shades into acceptance. Thus, ill people adapt when they try to accommodate and flow with the experience of illness. . . . After long years of ignoring, minimizing, struggling against, and reconciling themselves to illness, they adapt as they regain a sense of wholeness, of unity of body and self in the face of loss. (Charmaz, 2009, pp. 155–156)

Social life can be messy and complex. Unfortunately, the short form of an academic research article might not always permit a detailed explanation of the complex messes people sometimes get into. That's why the skills of condensing, patterning, and unifying are necessary for research write-ups. Researchers don't have to present watered-down accounts of field experiences for research reportage, but they do need to put forth the major headlines or findings.

Researchers must also acknowledge that life's contradictions do not always enable a neatly unified analysis, and some issues are so complex that they require book-length narratives to describe the necessary, tightly interwoven details. Unity does not mean tying things up in a neat satin bow. A coarse hemp rope full of knots and frays looks unattractive but still possesses unity.

Qualitative analysis requires that researchers know how to analyze people and their lives. Social life, in its broadest sense, is composed of action, reaction, and interaction.

Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction

Action is what a person does (e.g., thinking, speaking, and moving). **Reaction** is response to an action—to someone else's or one's own action or to given circumstances. **Interaction** is the collective back-and-forth sequences of action and reaction. These three terms and concepts constitute the cyclical process of humans engaged with social life. And a researcher's ability to perceptively observe and inquire about these processes provides her with rich data for intensive and, hopefully, insightful analysis. Clarke, Friese, and Washburn (2015) offer that people within social worlds are "groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals and building shared ideologies about how to go about

FIGURE 1.2 ● This couple is engaged in action, reaction, and interaction.



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their business. They are interactive units, worlds of discourse, bounded not by geography or formal membership but by the limits of effective communication” (p. 140).

When an action occurs in everyday life, fieldworkers observe it and make note of its meaning—that is, its reason, motive, drive, purpose, objective, goal, intention, and so forth. Reactions suggest much about how people perceive and respond to others and the world around them and, like actions, offer a window into their values, attitudes, and beliefs. Even thoughts kept inside the mind (imagining, fantasizing, meditating) are considered actions and reactions because they are purposive. Look at Figure 1.2 and infer what’s happening between the two people. A popular folk saying goes, “Life is 20% what happens to you, and 80% how you react to it.” Lieberman (2013) scientifically supports this by asserting that our social brains are hardwired for reciprocity and influence by others.

Interactions, or collective exchanges of actions and reactions, compose units or **moments** for analysis. Researchers infer and interpret the sometimes hidden, subtextual agendas within and between humans as they act, react, and interact. They also infer and interpret broader social meanings about these moments of interaction patterns. It is a complex interplay of communication that observers attempt to understand through psychological, sociological, anthropological, and even dramaturgical (i.e., theatrical) lenses, filters, and angles—that is, the way each researcher perceives the social world.

Below is a narrative example of a moment of social interaction. It is set in a restaurant on an early Friday evening. Two male customers approximately in their

fifties are seated in a booth and a female server, approximately in her mid-twenties, is assigned to them:

- SERVER:** *(walking by the table carrying a tray of dishes)* Hi, I'll be with you two gentlemen in just a minute, OK?
- CUSTOMER 1:** OK. *(approximately 2 minutes pass)*
- SERVER:** *(returns to table, smiling)* OK, thanks for waiting. Can I get you two started on some drinks? *(she sets down two paper napkins on the table)*
- CUSTOMER 1:** Yes, and I think we're ready to order too, if we may.
- SERVER:** Certainly, let's do it! *(opens and writes on her order pad)* What can I get you?
- CUSTOMER 2:** Can I get the club sandwich, extra mayo on the side, and instead of fries, can I get coleslaw instead?
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad)* Certainly. And to drink?
- CUSTOMER 2:** What kind of flavored ice teas do you have?
- SERVER:** We have green, tropical, and raspberry.
- CUSTOMER 2:** I'll take tropical, no lemon.
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad)* No lemon, OK. *(to other customer, smiling)* And for you?
- CUSTOMER 1:** I'll have water, a Diet Coke, and the stuffed corn tortillas.
- SERVER:** *(writing in her pad, cheerily)* OK, sounds good! Any appetizers to start with?
- CUSTOMERS 1 and 2:** No.
- SERVER:** *(smiling)* All right, I'll get this order sent to the kitchen for you right away. Thanks! *(she takes the menus from the table and leaves)*

To some, this might seem like a mundane, insignificant passage of dialogue exchanged between a restaurant server and customers. But to selected social researchers, the interaction is rich with meaning, as analyzed below. We offer that when we look at social action, reaction, and interaction (and notice the unity of those three terms), researchers can examine and analyze them through interrelated components we label the five Rs: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (notice the unity and pattern of alliteration in those five terms). Though all five work together in intricate interconnectivity, each one merits its own discussion.

Interpreting the routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life

The complexity of action, reaction, and interaction cannot always be neatly categorized into five separate facets for analysis, but they serve as an introductory foundation for focusing a researcher's lens, filter, and angle on social life.

Routines. When researchers look at the properties of life qualitatively, they examine what patterns of action and reaction reoccur. **Routines** are actions that take care of the everyday business of living, symbolize our self-cultivated and socialized habits, and meet our human need to create a sense of order. Some believe that everyday, mundane, trivial routines are not worthy of investigation. But these particular patterns of social interaction can hold particular significance for a particular study. Humans do things over and over again for a reason, even if that reason could be perceived as irrational or self-destructive. And remember, too, that instability and inconsistency can be considered patterns of action.

The server in the dialogic restaurant moment above more than likely has an established introductory routine for her job: greet customers, take their drink orders, return with their drinks, take their food orders, submit their food orders for preparation, and so on. And even though the customers might be visiting this restaurant for the very first time, there is a generalized routine or **schema** established from their previous dining experiences at other establishments: wait to be seated, review the menu, place drink and food orders with the server, and so on. This socialized pattern organizes the business of a public routine.

But life does not always go smoothly, and humans must often deal with disruptions to patterned routines. Notice that within the expected interaction routine at the restaurant, selected moments were breached. The server expected to take just the drink orders first, but the customers wanted to take care of their food order at the same time. Other minor breaches occurred, such as side dish substitutions, which the server seemed cheerily willing to accommodate. Her gracious reactions to the disruptions of her routine suggest that she was willing to assume a compliant role during the interaction to create a pleasant dining experience for the customers. On the other hand, the accommodation to take both drink and food orders at the same time might have been secretly to her advantage because it would save time. Thus, her accommodation was not an acquiescence of power, but a mutual agreement to beneficially speed the routine. Another interpretation, however, might hold that the server did indeed lose power, masked by her cheery performativity or emotional labor (Hochschild, 2003). In other words, she is paid to look happy and make customers feel satisfied.

Research gets enriched not only from examination of routines but also from the breaches, conflicts, and tensions that interrupt the flows of daily life. Researchers learn much from how people handle, avoid, and prevent the glitches that come their way. They also learn much from an awareness that people's routines can be repeated without question, prompting the researcher to reflect on the purpose or futility of

FIGURE 1.3 ● Mardi Gras initiates rituals with decor that symbolize the event's meaning.



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the special, significant, or the sacred—that is, the patterned ceremonial event. These events or symbolic moments hold personal or cultural importance as they mark or affirm a tradition, an occasion, an achievement, a transition, a remembrance, or fulfillment. Lakoff and Johnson (2003) assert, “There can be no culture without ritual” (p. 234). Figure 1.3 illustrates how a holiday initiates rituals with decor that symbolize the event’s meaning.

People usually associate rituals with formal gatherings such as worship services, graduation ceremonies, weddings, and the like. But rituals can also exist in the daily or weekly routines of a brief prayer before a meal, a happy hour with friends every Friday afternoon, an exchange of gifts, or brisk morning runs through the neighborhood. A ritual transcends the routines of everyday matters because of the **significance** the pattern holds for the individual or group. Rituals are status-passages that demarcate transitions of some kind, usually through processes such as separation, reversal, continuity, cleansing, challenging, changing, renewing, or celebration. “These observances provide a form of performative punctuation in the passage of mundane time and the life-course” (Atkinson, 2015, p. 87).

Dining out might be considered not just another meal but also a ritual to some, because for most people it does not happen frequently and thus is considered a special event. But dining out might also be a routine for others because it might occur at predetermined, expected times—for example, every Friday night or every Sunday afternoon. Qualitative significance is subjectively attributed onto something by the participants and/or the researcher. If the overall action of dining out is a ritual, then the event is made up of smaller acts or micro-rituals—for example, the ritual of escorted seating to a table, the ritual of a friendly opening greeting by the server, the ritual of scanning the menu and selecting the “sacrifice,” and so on. And though tipping is usually not required, it is

these action patterns. As life is analyzed, qualitative researchers observe what people seem to be doing again and again and, perhaps more important, explore just why they are engaging in consistent action patterns.

Rituals. When researchers explore life qualitatively, they also look for the occasional nonroutine or nonmundane moments of action that seem to suggest meaningful importance, either to the participants or to the observer. This is a subjective interpretation: what is considered routine to one person could be deemed a **ritual** to another. Everyday life is occasionally punctuated with

a customary ritual in certain contexts, a token of thanks. Anthropologists have written much about the concept of ritual, ranging from cultures in developing countries to urban lifestyles, and from everyday matters to coming-of-age ceremonies. As it's used in this book, the word *ritual* means significant routine—that is, patterns of human action endowed with special meaning by their participants and/or from researchers' interpretations.

As life is observed, researchers discern whether a social pattern of action should be interpreted as a routine or a ritual. Rituals provide rich, self-contained nuggets for qualitative analysis. They lend insight into the value, attitude, and belief systems of the individual, group, or culture, and bring researchers closer to comprehending that which is symbolic, significant, and meaningful.

Rules. Most routines and rituals can be influenced to some extent by the **rules** set in place. When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine how tacit frames of acceptable social conduct or formal rules and laws are followed—or breached. Each society creates expectations, codes, and regulations for daily conduct, a process called **socialization**. This includes everything ranging from such benign behavior as waiting in line, to respecting the property of those who own it. Individuals also have their own rules for daily living, a personal code of ethics or a moral compass for action, reaction, and interaction with others. Those who do not conform to the socially established order of things might be perceived by the majority as deviant and stigmatized as outcasts. But rules are culturally and socially specific: what is unacceptable conduct in one setting or context might be completely appropriate in another setting or context.

Rules are based on traditions, morals, and value, attitude, and belief systems—they are part of a cultural grammar or schema (Bernard, 2018, p. 471). Their origins stem from sources as diverse as religious writings to current legislative needs as a society evolves (e.g., same-sex marriage, internet security, international terrorism). Even digital tools are laden with rules. Facebook, Twitter, and other social media require that users adhere to policies regarding appropriate language and images, along with structural rules such as length of postings or a user's minimum age. Rules, in their broadest sense, maintain social order and are usually designed to keep people and property safe from harm. Rules are an important part of the glue that holds a society together. But oppressive rules also exist, as does the abusive and discriminatory enforcement of such rules by those who abuse their authority. In addition, not everyone will agree with a particular law in place. As a colloquialism goes, "Not everything that is legal is ethical, and not everything that is ethical is legal."

In the restaurant scene above, there are few formal laws in place dictating the kind and quality of customer and server interactions. There are, however, social expectations that servers will show respect toward paying customers, and customers will respect the decorum of the establishment ("No shirt, no shoes, no service"). Even everyday conversation, including the question–answer adjacency pairs between the server and customers, follows tacit rules for dialogic turn-taking.

There are formal regulations and laws in place in many countries for restaurant employee health, sanitary conditions, proper food storage and preparation, and so on. Customers are also bound by acceptable forms of conduct in a public setting and an obligation to pay for food served to them and consumed. Although nothing is formally on the books (in the United States, at least) for gratuities that must be offered to servers, there are sociocultural traditions in place that encourage customers to tip servers according to the quality of service received (e.g., 15% for satisfactory service, 20% for very good service). The routine or ritualistic act of dining out is rife with rules.

Infractions of rules lead to a breakdown of the social order yet sometimes to positive outcomes. Traditions unquestioningly followed can lead to oppressive and even destructive consequences. Those who challenge the status quo often do so to create better life conditions or to initiate social justice. However, rules are about values systems, and conflicts can easily arise when one social segment's set of rules does not harmonize with the values system of another social segment. These rules refer to everything from a nation's constitution, to a teacher–student relationship, to unquestioned hegemony, to fascist police states, to Robert's Rules of Order.

Much of the academic literature refers to **power** as the grand construct that influences and affects social life. One of the concept's most insightful writers is philosopher Michel Foucault (1977), who proposed that power is sometimes an invisible network of social relationships in which the values system or ideology of one group is imposed on and accepted by another. Authoritative mandates restricting human actions can come from social institutions such as national and local government agencies, to people such as parents and older siblings. Power can also include a person's "cops in the head" (Boal, 1995), meaning indoctrinated messages learned throughout one's life about expected conduct and individual self-perception (e.g., "Real men don't cry," "I'm not attractive," "There's nothing I can do about it"). Some researchers maintain their lenses, filters, and angles on social life to investigate how those with and without power affect roles and relationships such as between people of different genders and/or races or between government and corporations. Rules, in their broadest sense, are just one facet of power, yet analyzing how they influence humans serves as a manageable way of understanding the complexity of power.

As researchers observe and analyze life, they document what rules guide the actions, reactions, and interactions of participants in their particular social settings. They determine what seems to be conditioned adherence to ways of working, formal organizational policies and procedures in place, and individual values systems influencing and affecting relationships. Gobo and Molle (2017) wisely remind us, though, that a society consists of more than rules, for the simplest of rules can generate complex human actions.

Roles. When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine human actions determined, to some extent, by the **roles** people play. Roles are the assumed or attributed actions, personas, and characteristics of individuals. Erving Goffman's (1959) groundbreaking sociological classic, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday*

Life, proposed that humans perform in accordance with how they wish to be perceived by others, and that personality consists of the various roles people portray throughout their lifetimes. But others might perceive people in different ways according to how they interpret such factors as physical appearance, speech, and social interactions.

At any given moment, each person plays one or more roles that possess various levels of **status** or position. In the military, privates respect and follow the orders of those with the rank of sergeant and lieutenant. Adult parents and teachers usually assume a higher status or power position over children and adolescents. Many men, knowingly or unknowingly, assume authority over women. Children (and adults) assume dominant roles over others when they act as bullies. Roles emerge from individuals' personalities or **identities**, a complex concept we discuss more fully in later chapters.

Roles are realized and enacted through particular routines, rituals, and rules of conduct. The restaurant scene above features two general, different roles: the customer and the server. Each role carries with it a socially constructed set of expectations—for example, expectations that the server will interact with customers in ways that will create a pleasant dining experience. Likewise, customers are expected in their roles to dine without disturbing other patrons with offensive actions such as loud profanity in a family restaurant. There are other general expectations such as common courtesy by customers toward the server—although some customers assume a more dominant role over someone whom they perceive in a subservient role. In this case, two white, senior, male customers interact pleasantly with a white, younger, female server. But if each of the three individuals' ages, genders, sexual orientations, races/ethnicities, nationalities, social classes, religious backgrounds, political affiliations, and family structures—let alone personalities—differed, the scene could have unfolded in a variety of ways.

Organizations and institutions also play roles in social life. For example, a restaurant chain's primary role is to provide food service, usually while earning a profit. A political party's primary role is to govern a nation in accordance with its ideological beliefs. The health care system's primary role is to treat the ill and maintain people's wellness. But a critical lens, filter, and angle on these institutions can reveal how their rules affect their roles. Certainly, the health care system provides essential support to patients in need, but the rules of its organizational structure can influence whether its role is charitable or profit driven. The pharmaceutical industry in the United States promotes its public role as the creator of innovative medicines to make people's lives better. But the news media, in their role as social informants, often present investigative reports that the pharmaceutical industry's private role is also to generate exorbitant profits for its executives and shareholders. Institutional roles can be multiple and conflicting, and their rules and relationships with society are always established by people.

As researchers observe and analyze life, they pay attention to the roles humans assume (or are assigned) and the accompanying actions that seem to correspond with them as they transfigure from one role to another. Qualitative researchers pay

FIGURE 1.4 ● Humans interact through their roles and relationships.



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particular attention to the dynamics of status and rule-making/rule-breaking during interactions between people. They detect how a role is composed of particular facets of character and society that together constitute a perceived identity.

Relationships. When researchers look at life qualitatively, they examine how people act, react, and especially interact with each other in various social contexts. **Relationships** vary in quality, depending on the attitude one holds toward another person, group, or institution. The closeness to or distance from others is perceived by the individual, and the degree of belong-

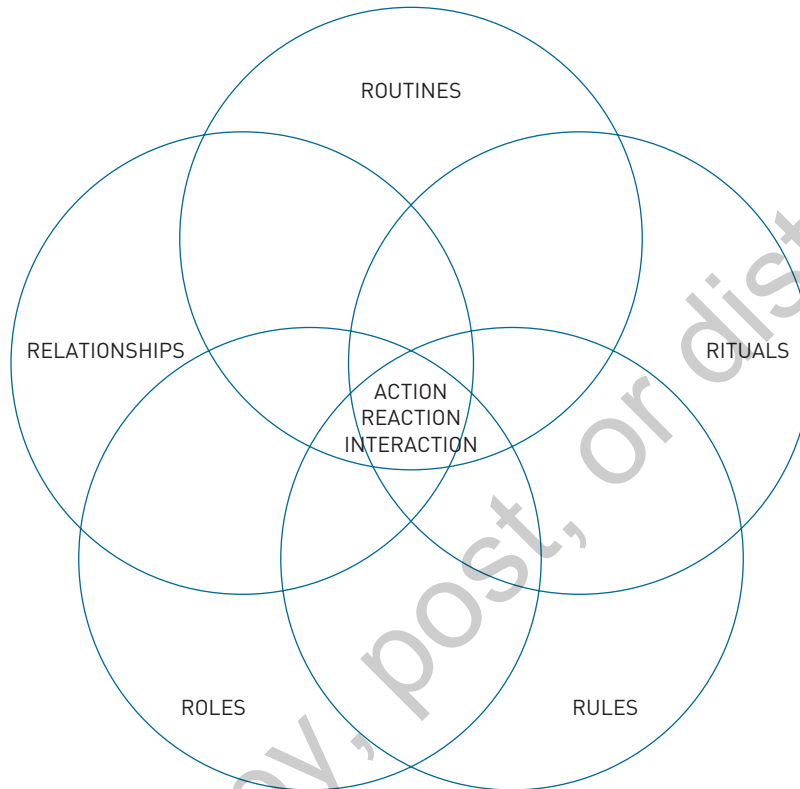
ing says much about the culturally constructed sense of community, family, group, membership, and so on. And relationships are dynamic, meaning they “are multiple, can be fluid, and change at different rates” (Pink et al., 2016, p. 107).

The roles people assume, to a significant degree, influence and affect the types of relationships they have with others, who are also in their own roles with their own perceptions of relationship status. Students assembled in a classroom with a teacher will jointly construct relationship dynamics that can vary from intimidating and toxic, to impersonal and businesslike, to nurturing and joyous. People’s perceptions of a nation’s leaders will also influence and affect a citizenry’s attitudes toward and interactions with their government, and establish an **ethos** or cultural pulse. Examine Figure 1.4 and describe the inferred relationship dynamics between the two people in the photo.

In the restaurant scene above, the interactions between the customers and server seem perfunctory yet pleasant. Exceptions to the menu rules were requested, not demanded. The server appears to cultivate a relationship that accommodates the desires of the diners, affirming any requests and changes in protocol. With roles come expectations, and the pleasantries of the server seem obligatory, yet they initiate courteous, interactive responses or reactions from the customers, who were not required to be polite but were motivated to do so by her positive demeanor and acquiescence.

Robert V. Kozinets (2020) offers that digital technology has reconfigured people’s live and online relationships into “networked individualism” in which they are connected rather than embedded in social groups. The internet is a “new neighborhood” where home and work, and the public and private, are intertwined. “Human beings and our technologies are part of a single and interrelated system” (p. 116).

FIGURE 1.5 ● The individual in social interaction experiences a tightly interwoven nucleus of action, reaction, and interaction patterns within the interrelated five Rs.



Social memberships are now partial rather than permanent, with more specialized peer-to-peer relationships. “Networked individuals move easily between relationships and social settings to construct their own complex identities, depending on their passion, beliefs, lifestyles, professional associations, work interests, hobbies, media habits, subcultural inclinations and other personal characteristics” (p. 123). As researchers investigate relationships, they reflect on how the digital technology many people use every day influences and affects the quality of individuals’ connections and networks.

Interaction is how relationships get constructed. They are collective chains of actions and reactions in which people in roles conduct routines and rituals in accordance with rules for living. Not every social interaction is equitable, however. People

have different goals and objectives for themselves and for others. These complex interaction patterns are what qualitative researchers attempt to discover in order to answer why people do the things they do. Figure 1.5 (p. 19) is our best attempt at visually illustrating the individual in social context—a tightly interwoven nucleus of action, reaction, and interaction patterns within the interrelated five Rs.

As researchers observe human action as it naturally occurs around them (including action online), or listen to people recounting their experiences and perceptions during an interview, they stay attuned to their collective interactions happening in the moment or as they recall them. Not only do fieldworkers carefully document their back-and-forth exchanges, they also analyze those exchanges for their explicit and implicit meanings. How one person relates with others reveals much about his own role identity and values, attitudes, and beliefs.

On Qualitative Data Analysis—and Life

Research methodologist Michael Quinn Patton (2015) posits, “Because each qualitative study is unique, the analytical approach used will be unique” (p. 522). We frontload readers with this principle early because many students in research courses seek, and probably also need, explicit procedures for the “correct” way to conduct qualitative data analysis. Although it is possible to make errors that deviate too far from accepted practices, there really is no one “right” way to analyze qualitative data.

Nevertheless, there are some established guidelines and methods available for this mode of inquiry. The analytic methods chosen depend on several factors, including the forms of data collected (discussed in Chapters 2–5), the methodological genre employed and the types of research questions posed (discussed in Chapters 6–7), the types of participants studied and the parameters for investigation (Chapter 8), and a variety of other matters including the researcher’s own comfort level with particular analytic approaches (Chapters 9–10) and the form a final presentation takes (Chapters 11–12). Analysis does not start after all the data have been collected. Analysis is an ongoing process from beginning through end of an inquiry. Remember that qualitative researchers work inductively, constructing questions when a topic first emerges for possible investigation, then constructing answers as fieldwork progresses, data emerge, and the report is composed.

Though we emphasize qualitative data analysis from the very beginning of this book, we cannot possibly cover everything there is to know about the subject in just one chapter. Instead, we distribute throughout this text methods of analysis as they relate to the particular topics discussed. Think of analysis as a **through-line**—that is, a thematic thread that weaves throughout the research endeavor or extended experience. It is our goal that each chapter cumulatively builds within readers a series of techniques and skills. We prefer not to think of these collected strategies as a toolkit or recipe book. Instead, we think of these methods collectively as a compendium of

analytic knowledge, a repertoire of analytic skills, or even a mental rolodex of methods accessed on an as-relevant basis (Saldaña, 2015).

As for analyzing life, we acknowledge that that is a formidable task, especially in an era when buzzwords such as *complexity*, *messiness*, *ambiguity*, *uncertainty*, and *troubling the data* appear in selected philosophical approaches to inquiry. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, artists, poets, playwrights, and everyday citizens of the world have been trying to analyze life ever since people could conceptualize that something puzzling about human existence needed to be answered. One would think that with the millennia of knowledge humans have accumulated as a species, people would have figured out how to live ideally by now. But the human race has still not “gotten it right.” There are too many conflicts, too many unanswered questions, too many unsolved problems, and too many unresolved issues.

Research is one way of reflecting deeply on the human condition, and there are multiple methods to help gather the information needed to make substantive insights and revelations. But we also acknowledge that methods alone are insufficient. We take counsel from case study methodologist Robert E. Stake (1995), who wisely offers that “Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (p. 19). It is our hope that this book might help readers sharpen the thinking skills needed to analyze life in its multifaceted complexity.

Closure and Transition

Qualitative researchers and data analysts should possess five fundamental skills. They

1. Condense large amounts of data;
2. Notice patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials;
3. Unify seemingly different things;
4. Understand social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction; and
5. Interpret routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life (the five Rs).

These analytic skills will be utilized as additional techniques for qualitative inquiry are learned. They

serve the researcher through all phases, stages, and cycles of the process, from literature reviews through fieldwork observations, and from research question development through final write-up.

Qualitative Research: Analyzing Life takes a pragmatic stance toward investigation. We believe it's important for novices to know the craft of research before they tackle the art or design of it. Thus, the next chapter focuses on what is considered one of the primary ways many researchers learn about the social world: observing people in patterns of action, reaction, and interaction in natural settings as they go about their routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships.

Resources for an Introduction to Qualitative Analysis

The following resources offer additional guidance for an introduction to social inquiry:

Abbott, Andrew. (2004). *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. Norton.

Becker, Howard S. (1998). *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think About Your Research While You're Doing It*. University of Chicago Press.

Saldaña, Johnny. (2015). *Thinking Qualitatively: Methods of Mind*. SAGE.

Analytic Exercises

1. Visit the Remote Associates Test website and complete several exercises to develop your pattern recognition skills: www.remote-associates-test.com/
2. In one household room, list up to 30 things you see that have patterns to them or on them (e.g., stripes on a pillow, pleats on a curtain), objects that are multiple (e.g., 25 books shelved horizontally), and overall organizational patterns (e.g., all furniture pieces pushed against the wall).
3. Visit a public social space such as a movie theater lobby, fast food restaurant, or shopping mall. Simply observe and listen for approximately 15 minutes to the actions, reactions, and interactions of people. Stay particularly attuned to how people react to someone else's dialogue in conversation.
4. Write a list of your typical activities done throughout an average week (a minimum of 30 different actions). Separate the list into three columns: actions you consider routines, actions you consider rituals, and as the center column, actions that are both or variable (i.e., it depends). Reflect why you consider the actions in the ritual column ritualistic, and why the central column's contents vary.
5. Visit a public social space such as a movie theater lobby, fast food restaurant, or shopping mall. Look for any posted signage that explicitly states rules of conduct in the space (e.g., "No smoking," "Only service animals allowed"). Then observe what forms of tacit (i.e., socially understood) rules of conduct are exhibited by people in the space.
6. Reflect on and discuss with others how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed daily actions, reactions, and interactions, plus its influences and affects on people's routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships.

Sample Data for Analysis

Below is an excerpt from an interview with Colin, a former employee of a movie theater discussing his job responsibilities. (Additional portions from the complete interview will be discussed in later chapters. The complete transcript can be downloaded from the book's companion website at <https://edge.sagepub.com/saldanaomasta2e>.)

Read and reflect on the transcript excerpt and apply one or more of the five fundamental analytic skills to these data. Possible applications include

Condensing large amounts of data: Condense this excerpt to one third its length, selecting and retaining only the most salient passages. Or underline, circle, or highlight the most significant words/phrases to you to compose an initial set of In Vivo Codes.

Noticing patterns in textual, visual, and digital materials: Identify what occurs or what is discussed more than twice in this data excerpt.

Unifying seemingly different things: Interrelate the different patterns observed in the data.

Understanding social processes of human action, reaction, and interaction: Describe what forms of action and reaction the participant takes, and what types of interactions occur between him and others.

Interpreting routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships of social life: Identify one or more of these five facets as discussed by the participant.

INTERVIEWER: In general, at that particular job, how did you personally approach customer service? In terms of policies and what you actually did, what were your mind-set and actions in terms of customer service?

COLIN: Sure. I am very adamant on customer service. Cleanliness is a big thing. I mean, they trained us on all these things, but even my own values and practices kind of seep through. I was always very apologetic. I like to keep the policies, and even though there were managers that had conflicting thoughts, I tried hard to be accommodating to whoever was supervising me.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever a time when you were unable to give a customer something they wanted or meet a request of theirs because it conflicted with a policy? A time where somebody wanted something and you were not able to provide that?

COLIN: Absolutely. Absolutely. So, our drinks specifically were nonrefillable, and there were many guests who came back and said, “Can I have a refill?” or, “Oops. I spilled this drink. Could I get a refill?” and because of policy we can’t. Because that’s just what they tell us to do. We can’t give refills on drinks, even if they spill them.

INTERVIEWER: Can you think of any specific examples of a time where somebody came back and said that, and how you responded?

COLIN: Sure. What comes to mind, actually, was it, was a group of teenage girls, and they had bought a large drink and a large popcorn—and large popcorns get refills, but not drinks—and right after ordering it, almost three feet away, the

girl dropped her drink, and it went scattering. And they came up, and they were like, “Oh my goodness. Can I get a refill?” Because of policy, I had to say, “Unfortunately, we don’t do refills. I could sell you another drink.” And they were a little discouraged because they were thinking about the drink on the ground, and they felt like it was an accident. They luckily didn’t push anything too much. I think they got a medium drink after that, but they were a little discouraged by the fact that I couldn’t just refill their spilled drink.

INTERVIEWER: Any other times? Any other situations where somebody asked way beyond that? Where a customer was more dissatisfied by that?

COLIN: I mean, it was a policy that lots of employees had issues with because it wasn’t consistent. Some employees let them have it, and so there was one time when—not with me, but the person next to me—where he came back for a refill, and he made this big fuss about how, “The last time I was here, I had refills. This is garbage. Let me talk to your assistant manager.” And we went and got the manager, and the manager explained and apologized, saying they couldn’t give them a refill. But it never got violent. It was just very loud noises. It was very disgruntled kind of yelling.

INTERVIEWER: How did the customer feel at the end of the situation, do you think? What did they express?

COLIN: That’s a good question. I do not know the ending of that story. All I know is that they didn’t get what they wanted, and they made a big fuss, and then they went back to the theater. That’s all I’ve heard. They might have done more afterwards, but . . .

INTERVIEWER: In general, do you have any thoughts on how you personally might have navigated any differences between a customer’s expectation—what they wanted—and the policies? What were some of your thoughts on that topic?

COLIN: Well, that’s tough because they advertise customer service first, but then some of the policies are more on the business side and less on the customer’s side. So how I, I always try to be cordial. I always try to approach the circumstances, try to do everything I possibly could, based on the policies, but due to the fact that I am employed and getting paid by them, I made sure to keep the policies of selling, and not giving refills, and making sure that you’re checking ID for seventeen and younger, and so forth.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think about policies like that? For example, the girls who spilled their drink in front of you, and it was clear they spilled it and didn’t drink it. How do you think if you were the employer, if you were the person making the decision, how would you have handled that?

COLIN:

That's a good question. I would first have to analyze the situation. I'd have to see how many people are around because, like, if there were lots of people around and you gave out a free refill, even though it went against your policy normally, other people might use that excuse to get more drinks, which I could see on the business end not being good. But, in their scenario, where nobody was around, I don't think it would have taken that much just to refill them, or even get a new cup and just not charge them, considering it was an accident. It was a clear accident. You saw it happen, and, you know, things like that happen.

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