Language and Meaning: Data Collection in Qualitative Research

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Qualitative research is inquiry aimed at describing and clarifying human experience as it appears in people’s lives. Researchers using qualitative methods gather data that serve as evidence for their distilled descriptions. Qualitative data are gathered primarily in the form of spoken or written language rather than in the form of numbers. Possible data sources are interviews with participants, observations, documents, and artifacts. The data are usually transformed into written text for analytic use. Selection of interview participants requires purposeful and iterative strategies. Production of interview data requires awareness of the complexity of self-reports and the relation between experience and languaged expression. To generate interview data of sufficient breadth and depth requires practiced skill and time. Production of useful data from other sources is addressed.

Qualitative research is an umbrella term under which a variety of research methods that use languaged data are clustered. Current textbooks and handbooks (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Merriam, 2002; Seale, Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004; Smith, 2003; Weinberg, 2001) typically describe a variety of research methods that make use of languaged data. Creswell (1998) proposed that the multiple approaches could be organized under five different traditions: biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. The diverse qualitative approaches ask to answer different kinds of research questions and make use of different analytic tools. The kind of languaged data they collect and the manner in which it is collected varies according to their disciplines and positions regarding the philosophy of science.

The reemergence of social science research methods based on qualitative data can be identified with the publication of The Discovery of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Straus, 1967). Although sociological studies that used the symbolic interaction approach (Merton, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975) and anthropological studies based on field studies appeared in the early decades of the 20th century, by the middle of the century, mainstream social sciences reverted to the almost exclusive use of statistically based research. In the 40 years since their reemergence, qualitative methods have had a significant impact in the disciplines of sociology, education, and nursing. This impact is just beginning in psychology.

During the last 40 years, there has been considerable expansion in the variety of qualitative methods. The youthfulness of the resurgence permitted creativity and experimentation by qualitative researchers. However, as their use has become more acceptable in the social sciences, a consolidation, rule setting, and “the right way to do it” seems to be underway through the process of “textbookification.” Also during these 40 years of expansion, the philosophy of social science has undergone major developments.

Many qualitative researchers have been influenced by such developments and have adopted their methods to reflect these changes. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have held that different qualitative methods reflect the stage of development in the philosophy of social science in which the method was developed. They noted that there were five stages in which methods were developed: the traditional period (1800–1940s), the modernist phase (1950–1970s), the period of blurred genres (1970–1980s), the time of the crisis of representation (1980s–1990s), and the postmodern and postexperimental stages (mid-1990s–present). As qualitative research moved through each phase, new methods were developed; however, methods developed in earlier periods were not discarded. Thus, the current repertoire of qualitative methods is a matrix of methods developed in different disciplines, different traditions, and on the basis of different ideas of science. In this article, I do not try to accommodate all the diverse and important differences within the full range of approaches included under the umbrella of qualitative methods. I limit myself to a generic discussion of the most used approach to qualitative data gathering—participant interviews. The use of other sources of qualitative data (e.g., observational and visual data, documents, and artifacts) is addressed by various other articles in this special issue. However, I do briefly consider observational data and documentary evidence as they relate to the production of participant interview data.

The use of languaged data is not new to psychology. In the early decades of psychology, James’s (1902) study of religious experiences used documents. Brentano’s (1874/1995) studies of consciousness were based on languaged reflections of experience, and Wundt’s (1874/1904) experiments on correlations between changes in stimuli and changes in experience relied on languaged reports from participants. Early psychology was focused on the study of people’s experiences. With the advent of behaviorism, inquiry shifted to the study of observable behavior. Experience was held to be unavailable to public observation, and, thus, it was something that could not be studied by what were then considered acceptable methods. According to behaviorism, because experience occurred within the “black box” of a participant’s awareness, it could not be subject to investigation.

Beginning in the 1960s, coincident with the reemergence of the use of qualitative methods in other social sciences, psychology moved to reopen investigations of the black box of people’s awareness (see Gardner, 1985). Under the label of cognitive psychology, the discipline has turned its attention back to the subjec-
The Study of Experience

The area to be studied should determine the inquiry methods. The experiential life of people is the area qualitative methods are designed to study. "Qualitative inquiry deals with human lived experience. It is the life-world as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84). A primary purpose of qualitative research is to describe and clarify experience as it is lived and constituted in awareness. Human experience is a difficult area to study. It is a complex and rich interplay of thoughts, feelings, and actions. It is not a linear process, but rather a dynamic, ongoing process that unfolds as we go about our daily lives. Experience has a vertical depth, and methods of data gathering, such as short-answer questionnaires with Likert scales that only gather surface information, are inadequate to capture the richness and fullness of an experience. People have access to much of their own experiences, but their experiences are not directly available to public view. Thus, the data gathered for study of experience need to consist of first-person or self-reports of participants' own experiences.

Qualitative Data

The data required to study experience require that they are derived from an intensive exploration with a participant. Such an exploration results in languaged data. The languaged data are not simply single words but interrelated words combined into sentences and sentences combined into discourses. The interconnections and complex relations of which discourse data are composed make it difficult to transform them into numbers for analysis. Producing findings from these data require analytic tools specifically designed to work with languaged data.

The form of qualitative data as discourse has significant differences from the form of quantitative data as numbers. Current qualitative research was developed in a context in which mainstream social science research valued and used statistical designs. Statistical designs have given specific, technical meanings to the terms it uses to describe its processes (e.g., significance, velocity, sampling). Because the use of these terms has connotations drawn from their specialized use, their adoption to describe similar but different qualitative processes can lead to misunderstandings.

Data is one of these terms. In the context of quantitative research, the meaning of data is linked to the "sense data" of observations. "In contemporary usage, data has come to mean an array of information, as in data set or data bank" (McLeod, 2001, p. 137). It connotes "bits" of information. In addition, in the quantitative context, data implies that its information is a direct reflection of the thing it is about and is independent of those who gathered it. However, qualitative data, whether in oral or in written discourse, are not identical to the experience they are describing. Also, qualitative data in their oral form are a product of the interaction between participant and researcher. Some qualitative researchers (e.g., McLeod, 2001; Van Manen, 1990) have suggested the use of alternative terms such as accounts. Nevertheless, it has become customary to use the term data to describe the accounts gathered by qualitative researchers. I use the term data in this article, with the understanding that it does not have the same connotation here as it does in quantitative research.

Data as Evidence

The purpose of data gathering in qualitative research is to provide evidence for the experience it is investigating. The evidence is in the form of accounts people have given of the experience. The researcher analyses the evidence to produce a core description of the experience. The data serve as the ground on which the findings are based. In constructing the research report, the researcher draws excerpts from the data to illustrate the findings and to show the reader how the findings were derived from the evidential data.

Most often the evidence takes the form of written texts. Written evidence is gathered from documents, and data originally generated in oral form (e.g., through interviews) are transformed into written texts through transcription. However, the evidence itself is not the marks on the paper but the meanings represented in these texts. It is not the printed words themselves that can be analyzed by counting how many times a particular word appears in the text. Rather, the evidence is the ideas and thoughts that have been expressed by the participants. In this sense, the textual evidence is indirect evidence.

Limitations of Self-Reports as Evidence

Evidence about human experience has inherent limitations compared with data about human behavior. Because experience is not directly observable, data about it depend on the participants' ability to reflectively discern aspects of their own experience and to effectively communicate what they discern through the symbols of language. These limitations on evidence of experience hold for both qualitative and quantitative methods of inquiry. Quantitative data about experience are often produced by self-reports of participants to a series of questions that make up a psychological instrument. In addition to the issues about participants' partial access to their own thoughts and the numeric or languaged translation of these thoughts to an instrument's questions, there is the additional concern about the construct validity of a quantitative instrument. That is, does the instrument's series of questions actually capture the fullness of and variations within the experience? Although these limitations also hold for qualitative evidence production, they are recognized, and methods of data collection are used to lessen their effect.

Evidence in the form of reports from participants' self-reflection has a long history in psychology. In the first decades of academic psychology (1880–1890s), terms such as introspection, self-observation, and inner perception were used to denote this type of data (Danziger, 1980). The behaviorist revolt rejected any form of
"introspectionism" as lacking the objectivity of publicly observable events. Despite the current use of self-report data in psychological statistically based studies, there is still antipathy toward these data. In clinical and counseling psychology, client self-reports have been, since Freud, the primary manner for gaining an understanding of human experience. Data in the form of client self-reflection reports remain the basic source for diagnostic and treatment decisions in psychotherapeutic work.

Although self-report evidence is necessary and valuable for inquiry about human experience, it is not to be misconstrued as mirrored reflections of experience. People do not have complete access to their experiences. The capacity to be aware of or to recollect one's experiences is intrinsically limited. People do not have a clear window into their inner life.

Any gaze is always filtered through the lens of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. Subjects or individuals are seldom able to give full explanations of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 12)

In addition, reflection on an experience serves to change the experience. For example, reflection by a person who is in a state of anxiety serves somewhat to distance and lessen the anxious feeling.

Self-Report Data and Language

Although people's experiences are not perfectly transparent to them, they do have at least partial access to them. However, the translation of a reflective awareness of an experience into a languaged expression might further distance the evidence of an experience from the experience itself. The kind of interaction that holds between experience and its description in language remains a contested philosophical issue (Devitt & Sterelny, 1987). Positions on this issue lie along a continuum from Husserl's phenomenological idea that experiences proceed language to Derrida's postmodern notion that experience itself is a construction of the language one speaks. Gendlin (1962) understood that experience is more complex than language and that it informs and corrects the words people use to express it. He cited as an example a writer's struggle to find the right word to accurately express a feeling or thought. Arneheim (1969) recognized that recollections and thinking often occur in visual images and that language is often an inadequate presentation of a visual experience. Wierzbicka (1999), however, in her cross-cultural study of words used to express emotional feelings, held that "the way people interpret their own emotions depends, to some extent at least, on the lexical grid provided by their native language" (p. 26). Ricoeur (1977, 1984) presented a middle position in which he holds that experience is more complex and nuanced than can be expressed in literal language. To capture the richness of experience in language often requires the use of figurative expressions such as metaphors and narratives. These expressions expand the meanings contained in literal language to those that more closely indicate experienced meanings. Ricoeur maintained that languaged expressions themselves add to experience and serve to conceal and give differentiation to experiences.

Despite the problems involved in transforming human life experiences into language, language is our primary access to people's experiences. Brain scans can only indicate neurological activity, not the experienced content of that activity. However, the production of these data requires an awareness of the issues involved in languaged expressions of experience. Thus, researchers need to be sensitive to the significance of participants' use of metaphors and stories in their expressions. They should be attentive to the possibility that the meaning of expressions given by participants whose first language differs from that of the researchers may need to be clarified. Researchers are required to understand that translations of gathered data from one language to another may distort meaning. They are also obliged to be aware that participants vary in their facility to explore experience and to express the exploration in language. In addition, it is necessary that qualitative data collectors are aware that information and nuance is lost when oral data are transcribed into written text.

Selection of Participants

Because the focus of qualitative research differs from the focus of statistical research, it requires a set of principles for the selection of data sources. The focus of statistical research is to make claims about a population on the basis of the study of a sample of that population. Thus, it requires a random or representative selection of data sources from a population. The focus of qualitative inquiries is on describing, understanding, and clarifying a human experience. It requires collecting a series of intense, full, and saturated descriptions of the experience under investigation.

Although the term sampling is generally used in qualitative research to refer to the selection of participants and documents, the term must be used with care. It is another term, like data, that has been adopted from quantitative practices but whose meaning has been altered. Sampling carries the connotation that those chosen are a sample of a population and the purpose of their selection is to enable findings to be applied to a population. Sampling implies that the people selected are representative of a population. I think that the term selection more closely describes the method for choosing qualitative data.

van Kaam (1969) produced an early qualitative study on a topic of relevance for counseling psychology, the experience of being understood. In his write-up, he describes the purpose of qualitative research:

To determine what kind of experience is called 'feeling understood' and how it is experienced is precisely the problem of our research. ... Therefore, ... we must start from the various data of experience in order to formulate a valid description. (p. 314)

Participants and documents for a qualitative study are not selected because they fulfill the representative requirements of statistical inference but because they can provide substantial contributions to filling out the structure and character of the experience under investigation.

The unit of analysis in qualitative research is experience, not individuals or groups. Qualitative studies vary in the kinds of experience they investigate; yet, their interest is about the experience itself not about its distribution in a population. Some studies focus on displaying the constituent and relational aspects that make up an experience, and other studies focus on exhibiting an experiential process. An example of a study of an experiential structure is the Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) phenomenological study of the experience of learning. An example of an inquiry into an experiential process is Brott and Myers's (1999) grounded theory.
study of the experience of the development of counselor identity. Findings from these qualitative studies provide an enriched understanding of an experience itself rather than how different individuals or groups vary in their learning or how counselors vary in the number of years it takes to experience the achievement of professional identity. In both cases, the selection process involved a purposive selection of participants and documents that could serve as providers of significant accounts of the experience under investigation.

Selection of sources of qualitative data is analogous to the selection of sentences in a study of grammar. If the question is about the essential aspects or properties of a sentence, then one initially selects a variety of sentences. The first group of sentences is analyzed and found to consist of two different types—declarative and interrogative sentences. The search is continued not to find more of the types one has already gathered but for those that display other types of organization, such as imperative and exclamatory sentences. From these data examples, further analysis is carried out, leading to a finding that the essential aspect of a sentence is a subject–verb relation. Other aspects, such as phrases and connectives, can be attached to the subject–verb relation. In addition, the researcher notices that the order in which words are placed alters the sentence’s meaning—for example, “dog bites man” versus “man bites dog.”

Determining the essential aspects of sentences involves the selection of notable exemplars. Selection of exemplars differs from random selection in that exemplars are chosen for what they promise to contribute to the clarification of the topic being examined. If the question had been what the ratio of declarative sentences to interrogative sentences is in a particular book, then a different approach would be necessary. In this case, a statistical approach would be used to collect a representative sample from the book’s text. Qualitative findings are not directed to determining the most likely or mean experience within a group but to describing the aspects that make up an experience.

Purposive Selection

Because the goal of qualitative research is enriching the understanding of an experience, it needs to select fertile exemplars of the experience for study. Such selections are purposeful and sought out; the selection should not be random or left to chance. The concern is not how much data were gathered or from how many sources but whether the data that were collected are sufficiently rich to bring refinement and clarity to understanding an experience.

The purposive selection of data sources involves choosing people or documents from which the researcher can substantially learn about the experience. Patton (1990) has said that it is important to select “information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research, thus the term purposive sampling” (p. 169). Merriam (2002) gives the following advice to qualitative researchers:

To begin with, since you are not interested in ‘how much’ or ‘how often,’ random sampling makes little sense. Instead, since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which most can be learned. This is called a purposive or purposeful sample. (p. 12)

Individuals who can provide relevant descriptions of an experience are primarily those who have had or are having the experience. For example, a study of the experience of being depressed would include participants who have been or who are depressed. If the data are to be produced through an interview, then one would have to choose people who are willing to describe their experience to a researcher. In addition, one would choose participants who can adequately reflect on their experience and verbally describe it. Qualitative researchers most often use a small number of participants in their studies. The reason for the use of multiple participants is to provide accounts from different perspectives about an experience. By comparing and contrasting these perspectives, researchers are able to notice the essential aspects that appear across the sources and to recognize variations in how the experience appears. In this sense, multiple participants serve as a kind of triangulation on the experience, locating its core meaning by approaching it through different accounts. Triangulation does not serve to verify a particular account but to allow the researcher to move beyond a single view of the experience. The use of multiple participants serves to deepen the understanding of the investigated experience; it is not for the purpose of making claims about the distribution of the experience in a population.

Iteration

Selection of sources most often remains open throughout the research process. After initial accounts are gathered, they are analyzed to construct a preliminary description or a theory of the experience. On the basis of the preliminary description, additional participants are selected who are thought to be able to fill in, expand, or challenge the initial description. The research process is an iterative one, moving from collection of data to analysis and back until the description is comprehensive. One of the most used purposive–iterative processes of data collection was proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). They termed the process theoretical sampling, and it was later defined in Strauss and Corbin (1990) as the following:

Sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory. Relevance means that concepts are deemed to be significant because they are repeatedly present or notably absent when comparing incident after incident and are of sufficient importance to be given the status of categories. (p. 176)

Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that the iteration of data collection continues until the description of the experience is saturated, that is, until the new sources repeat what has been previously learned and no longer deepen or challenge the finding. Many qualitative studies have used static, rather than iterative, sampling. In static sampling, all the data are gathered prior to analysis. Although static sampling does not provide for choosing additional participants whose purpose is to challenge and deepen the initial analysis, it is sometimes a practical approach to data gathering. Nevertheless, static sampling eliminates the researcher’s ability to reach out to other participants who might correct or expand aspects of their developing description.
Selection Strategies

Qualitative studies have used various strategies for locating and recruiting participants who purposively fulfill the data needs of a study, whether those sources are initial or iterative sources. Researchers can first generate an expanded list of possible participants who have had the experience under investigation and might be available for interviews. This list, which serves as a participant pool, can be generated through asking a number of people who know a lot about the experience. Those mentioned can be added to the pool, and they can be asked whether they are aware of others who might be informed participants for the study. This is a “snowballing strategy,” for it produces a pool of possible participants. As the pool is generated, questionnaires can be used to produce brief descriptions of the people on the list. Information about the people on the list might be expanded by a brief telephone conversation.) The pool list remains open, and new members can be added even after the research has begun. The point of creating a list is to create a diverse pool of possible participants from which those to be interviewed can be purposively selected.

Depending on the aim of the research, different strategies of selection of participants from the pool can be used. One strategy is maximum variation sampling, in which the researcher selects participants with the most divergent forms of the experience. For example, in a study of the experience of being an undergraduate student, the researcher would select students from various kinds of schools—community colleges, both public and private 4-year colleges—and students from different undergraduate classes—freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. The intention of this selection process is to explore the variation within students as well as the common core of being a student. In contrast to the maximum variation strategy, the researcher can select participants from a particular subgroup whose experience is expected to be somewhat alike, for example, first-year students at a particular college whose parents are non-English speaking. This strategy is termed homogeneous sampling, and its purpose is to describe the experience of a particular subgroup in depth.

Another selection strategy is the selection of participants whose experience is typical of the one under study. The determination of which members of a pool are likely typical can come from informants, preliminary phone interviews, or member demographics. The purpose of selecting participants whose experience was typical is to produce a description that contains the usual structural dimensions of the experience—not to produce generalized descriptions that hold for all who have had the experience. In contrast to typical sampling is extreme or deviant sampling. For example, a study of the experience of a program intervention might select those participants whose experiences were most positive and those whose experiences were most negative. This strategy, unlike the strategy of selecting typical participants, allows for uncovering the boundaries of differences within an experience.

Other strategies include critical case (or participant) sampling and criterion sampling. In critical case sampling, participants whose experiences are particularly significant because of their intensity or irregularity are selected. For example, a study of the experience of anxiety, the researcher might choose students who are studying for a final examination in a course they are close to failing and that they need to pass to graduate. In criterion sampling, participants are selected who meet some important predetermined criterion. For example, a study of the experience of psychotherapy might select as participants those whose initial therapy began after the age of 50.

After the research is underway and initial analysis has begun to uncover patterns and characteristics of the experience, another selection strategy is used—the selection of confirmatory and disconfirmatory participants. As part of the iterative process of qualitative research, additional participants are selected. These additions are made within one of the previously mentioned strategies. The selections are based on the likelihood that they will confirm or elaborate on the emerging descriptions or provide opportunities for disconfirmation of the emerging pattern.

In all of these strategies, there is a reason and purpose for selecting participants. The accounts they can give are sought out because they are thought to provide an important perspective that should elucidate and clarify the experience being investigated. Participation in a qualitative study requires those selected to give considerable time. It is sometimes difficult for researchers to find suitable participants. Thus, gathering participants involves not only choosing those who fit a selection strategy but also finding people who are willing to be interviewed.

Because of the considerable effort involved in purposively gathering participants, some researchers fall into the least desirable selection process, convenience sampling. This approach is not so much a strategy as it is the use of people who happen to be available to the researcher as participants. Convenience sampling, most often fails to yield perspectives that expand and enhance the understanding of the breadth and depth of a studied experience.

The richness and depth of qualitative findings depend on the quality of the sources from which the analysis is drawn. Sources are chosen not on the basis that they are a randomlike representative of a population or because they happen to be available but because they can provide clarifying accounts of an experience. The focus of selection is not individuals but accounts of an experience. Selection is done with a purpose, and researchers should include in their write-ups a description of how and why they selected these particular sources. The validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research is related to the selection of viable sources that promote a deepening of the understanding of the experience inquired about.

Production of Evidence

The purpose of qualitative data is to provide evidence (i.e., to make evident) the characteristics of an experience. The data are in the form of descriptions or accounts that increase an understanding of human life as lived. There are three major sources of qualitative data: interviews, observations, and documents. Interviews produce first-person accounts of the experience; observations record or memo a researcher’s encounters in the presence of those undergoing an experience; and documents are written sources (although they can include oral or visual documents) about an experience.

However, data in these three forms are not simply collected. As McLeod (2001) has noted,

The influence of psychology on counseling and psychotherapy research has meant that even qualitative researchers can often fall into the trap of regarding their work as data collection (like picking apples from a tree) rather than construction (like writing a story). (p. 138)

Data used in qualitative research are not simply lying about on the surface ready to be gathered up, rather, the researcher is required to dig below the surface to bring up experiential accounts. The first
explore the experience with open-ended questions. Rennie (1992) suggested that the interviewer and the participant view or listen to the session. The interview takes place at that time. The researcher assists the interviewee to cover the topic and has often written out questions (or protocols) he or she thinks will be most relevant. The interview proceeds as a give-and-take dialectic in which the interviewer follows the conversational threads opened up by the interviewee and guides the conversation toward producing a full account of the experience under investigation.

Production of Interview-Based Data

The most widely used approach to the production of qualitative data is interviews with participants. Potter (1996) has defined interviewing as a "technique of gathering data from humans by asking them questions and getting them to react verbally" (p. 96). The purpose of the interview is to gain a full and detailed account from an informant of the experience under study. Kvale (1996) has written that its "purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon" (pp. 5-6). Assistance from the participant to produce such an account is a skilled activity. There is considerable overlap between the skills involved in research interviewing and those needed by counseling psychologists in their counseling and psychotherapeutic work. Both practices require an ability to form an accepting relationship, skill in active listening, and focus on the other's experiential world. However, the aims of the two practices differ. The aim of the research interview is to accomplish the researcher's goal of gaining information from the participant, and the aim of the counseling interview is to aid the client in accomplishing his or her goals. It is important for counselors doing a research interview to make clear to themselves and to the participants the goal that is being pursued.

Interviewing Formats

Although research interviews are sometimes conducted with groups (e.g., focus groups; Morgan, 1988, 2002), most qualitative interviews are one-to-one or dyadic interviews. Unlike questionnaires and formal diagnostic interviews, research interviews are most often unstructured. However, the researcher knows in advance the experience he or she wants the participant to describe and has often written out questions (or protocols) he or she wants the participant to cover. The interview proceeds as a "professional conversation" (Kvale, 1996, p. 5). The conversation consists of a give-and-take dialectic in which the interviewer follows the conversational threads opened up by the interviewee and guides the conversation toward producing a full account of the experience under investigation.

A kind of interview process of particular interest for counseling psychology research is the interpersonal process recall (IPR) method (Elliott, 1986). In the IPR process, a psychotherapy session is recorded on video (the process has also been used with audio recordings). After the session, the client or therapist sits with the interviewer and views or listens to the session. The interview takes place while the psychotherapy participant and interviewer are watching the tape. When an event appears that the participant recognizes as significant, the tape is stopped. Then the interviewee is asked to reflect on the event by recalling the experience that occurred at that time. The researcher assists the interviewee to explore the experience with open-ended questions. Rennie (1992) has used this method to explore aspects of the therapeutic process with outstanding success.

The production of participant accounts through interviewing involves the transfer of recalled experiences into languaged discourse. These accounts are given in prose form, that is, as ordinary spoken language. They are presented as sentences linked together into paragraphs and as paragraphs linked together into a text. The produced account may consist of a loosely linked collection of descriptions, explanations, and stories. It is common in qualitative research to refer to this interview-produced collection of prose responses as a narrative account (e.g., Van Manen, 1990). However, narrative researchers reserve the term narrative to refer to a particular kind of produced discourse and to distinguish narrative responses from other prose responses. Narrative responses have the form of a story with the beginning-middle-end structure. The described events and happenings are tied together by a plot, through which they are attributed meaning in terms of their contribution to the story's denouement (Polkinghorne, 1995). Accounts of an experience that are given in narrative form can require special analytic procedures (for more detail and elaboration, see Hodson, 2005).

It is the normal practice in qualitative interviewing to audio record the sessions. The recordings are transcribed, passing from the original oral form into written form. The purpose of the conversion into a written account is to allow the detailed and to-and-fro reading required in the analysis of the qualitative data. However, information present in the oral recording is lost in the transformation. Lost is the way in which things were said, the pacing, the intonation, and the emphasis in the talk. Symbol systems have been devised to capture these elements present in the oral tapes (e.g., those devised for use in conversational analysis; see ten Have, 1999). However, such systems are not in wide use.

The Interview Process

The researcher is interested in gaining a rich and inclusive account of the participant's experience. Often, the initial descriptions offered by the participant are restrained. They reflect concerns of the participant about the acceptability of the answers, a testing of what they want to reveal, or the surface of a remembered experience. Too often, interview-produced data contain only initial reflections of participants without explorations into the depth and breadth of the experience. In order to obtain interview data of sufficient quality to produce worthwhile findings, researchers need to engage with participants in more than a one-shot, 1-hr session; they need to attend to establishing a trusting, open relationship with the participant and to focus on the meaning of the participant's life experiences rather than on the accuracy of his or her recall.

The typical qualitative interview has been a one-shot occurrence lasting about 1 hr. However, one-shot interviews are most often not sufficient to produce the full and rich descriptions necessary for worthwhile findings. Seidman (1991) has suggested that a sequence of three interviews with a participant is more likely to produce accounts of sufficient depth and breadth. He has suggested that the focus of the first interview be on getting acquainted, developing rapport, laying out the area that the researcher would like the interviewee to explore, and trying some initial forays into the topic. Between the first and second interview, the participant will have had time to think more deeply about the experience, and,
thus, the second interview should be more focused and should allow time to explore the experience in depth. Before the third interview, the researcher reviews the transcript of the first two interviews. In the third interview, the researcher asks follow-up questions to fill in and to clarify the account, and the participant can add newly remembered information. Quality interview data usually involves multiple sessions with participants, including follow-up interviews to clarify and expand participant descriptions during the analytic process.

To move past initial thin, surface responses from participants, researchers need to demonstrate to the participant that it is safe to be open and revealing of deeply personal feelings and information. As the interview conversation advances, at each additional level of uncovering, concerns of the participant are often revisited. In order to assist in helping interviewees to further openness to share details of their experiences, the researcher needs to maintain rapport with and the confidence of the interviewee (Glaser, 1978). Access to one’s experiences is not straightforward; it often requires assistance and probing to discover and explore areas of the experience that did not emerge initially. It is the interviewer’s task to help in unpacking an experience and gaining access to deeper levels and more nuanced descriptions of the experience. Because of the individual differences of interviewees and the unpredictable flow of a research conversation, qualitative interviewing cannot be reduced to a set of techniques or instructions, rather, it relies on the skilled judgment of the interviewer to move the conversation along.

As a means for gaining access to the meaning experiences of participants, researchers often ask participants to explore and give accounts of past experiences, not of those they are presently having. But the accounts produced through interviewing are not mirrored images of the participants’ experience as it actually occurred in the past. Memories are reconstructions of the past, not simply retrieval. Human memory is not an infallible system (Schacter, 1999). For example, memories of past experiences may be colored by present mood and emotional state, and they can be influenced by suggestions (compare the recent debate over repressed memory syndrome). However, memory of past experiences is not completely fallible. Recall of an experience’s meaning can be primed and assisted by interviewers. The purpose of the exploration of remembered events is not to produce accurate recalls but to provide an occasion for reflection on the meaning these events have for the participant.

Producing interview data is unlike the production of questionnaire data. In questionnaire data, the questions are held to be a constant stimulus so that the only variation in answers can be ascribed to originate from the respondent. In producing interview data, the questions vary and are adjusted to the individual being interviewed. The presence and variety of questions posed by the researcher affect a participant’s recall, and, thus, the produced account is sometimes referred to as a coconstruction.

The interviewer’s presence and form of involvement—how she or he listens, attends, and terminates responses—is integral to a respondent’s account. It is in this specific sense that a “story” is a joint production (Mishler, 1986, p. 82). Although the produced account is affected by the researcher, it is important that the participant remain the author of the description. The function of the researcher is more like a supportive editor whose assistance leads the author to produce a fuller and deeper account. Because the recall of an experience is elusive and subject to interviewer suggestions, researchers need to take care that their expectations do not infiltrate the account. They need to manage their influence and bring focus to the participant’s own understandings. An account that is authentically the participant’s description depends on the integrity of the interviewers and their awareness of their own propensities to generate accounts that match their own expectations.

The purpose of interviews is to produce alternative perspectives on the experience under study. The researcher does not learn more about an experience when a participant’s account simply duplicates what the researcher already knows. The most useful accounts describe unexpected and unanticipated aspects of an experience. New aspects that appear during a participant’s description enrich the collection of data and call for the researcher to probe and explore those aspects further.

The production of quality data through participant interviews requires skillful exploration with each participant. Although training in counseling interviewing is helpful in qualitative research interviewing, it is not directly transferable. Research interviewing has different goals and requires different skills. Attaining sufficient skill in research interviewing requires practice and instruction. Sufficient research interviewing skill needs to be practiced and mastered before beginning a qualitative study. Also, to achieve full scrutiny of their experience by participants, sufficient time with them is required. The singular word interview is used as an adjective modifying a type of data, that is, interview data. It does not connote that interview data require only a single interview.

Use of Observational Data

“Observation is the technique of gathering data through direct contact with an object—usually another human being. The researcher watches the behavior and documents the properties of the object” (Potter, 1996, p. 98). Observations are the primary data source in sociological community studies and anthropological field studies (Angrosino & Mays de Perez, 2000). Observations are also used to supplement and clarify data derived from participant interviews. One source of observational data in connection with interviewing is the participants’ behaviors, facial expressions, gestures, body tone, clothing, and other nonverbal indications. Data from these sources can be used to shed light on the meaning of a participant’s oral comments. Another source is the environment in which the interview takes place; for example, if an interview is conducted in a participant’s home or office, the furniture arrangement, displays of photos and pictures, books, magazines, and other reading materials can serve as indicators of a participant’s experience. Observational data take on a larger role in qualitative inquiries that concern experiences of children or those of other persons who are only able to express their thoughts with difficulty.

To be incorporated into the collection of textual data used in analysis, observations need to be recorded in written form. Observational notes can be recorded during an interview, but most often, they are made immediately after its conclusion. The immediacy is important to allow better recall of the observations and their contribution to an understanding of the experience. Some researchers first record their observations with an audio recorder and transcribe them later. Others record them directly in written form. Further contributing observations may be recalled during a review of the interview audiotape. The observational notes, often termed memos in the qualitative literature, are attached to the interview.
transcriptions as part of the text to be analyzed. (Memos are also produced during the analysis of data to capture ideas and thoughts of researchers as they come to mind.) Memos can serve to adjust the protocol and remind interviewers of topics they want to explore in follow-up interviews or approaches to use in interviewing new participants.

Patton (1987) has noted that "[l]evel of quality of observational data are highly dependent on the skill, training, and competence of the evaluator" (p. 70). Skilled observation is the result of training and focus. The production of useful observational data differs from ordinary, everyday observation. A skilled observer is able to identify and describe observations that will contribute to a clarified and saturated description. Not everything that is sensed in an interview situation is significant, and some significant observations are not immediately apparent. As is the case in producing worthwhile interview data, producing useful observational data requires training and experience.

Use of Documentary and Visual Data

Documentary evidence can consist of written, oral, visual (such as photographs), or cultural artifacts (see Hodder, 1994; Prior, 2004). Documents are an underused source of data for counseling psychology. Over the years, counseling psychology has accumulated a vast number of recorded psychotherapy and counseling sessions. The transcripts and videotapes of these sessions contain a reservoir of data that can serve counseling researchers. For example, Zukowski (1997) selected a series of transcripts of Rogers' therapy sessions as data for her study of the dialogic of rest and movement in psychotherapy.

There are several other approaches to the use of documents in qualitative counseling psychology research. Stevick (1971) used documents in her study of the experience of anxiety. Instead of interviewing participants, she had them write essays about their experience. Although much less time-consuming than conducting interviews with each participant, essays do not provide the kind of data that is possible through the interview exploration through the layers of experience. S. E. Otternes (personal communication, March 12, 2004), in his study of the spiritual dimension of therapy, has collected written descriptions by mystics of their spiritual experiences. S. R. Ramesh (personal communication, March 12, 2004) has collected self-studies and other documents from a selection of counseling psychology programs as data for her study about the implementation of the scientist-practitioner model of training. McCabe's (2003) study of the experience of grief used published personal journals and published descriptions. Her analysis of these data portrayed grief as a long-term, continuing, and spiraling phenomenon in opposition to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (4th ed.; American Psychiatric Association, 1994) picture of grief as a short-term phenomenon that should end after 6 months.

Literature reviews in both qualitative and quantitative studies can be seen as a type of qualitative research. The documents selected for data are from the scientific literature related to the research question. An analysis based on qualitative principles is used to identify the essential themes and variations that have appeared in the body of previous research.

Conclusion

Although interviews, supplemented by observational and documentary data, have served as the primary source of qualitative data, they are not the only method for producing qualitative data. Qualitative researchers have been quite creative in finding other ways to tap into people's experiential life. For example, Caizsente-mihalyi (1990), in his study on flow, had participants wear beepers. The researcher would place calls to the beepers at different times, and participants were to write down what and how they were experiencing at the time of the call. Aanstoos (1986) studied the psychology of thinking by use of the "think-aloud" technique. In think aloud, participants monitor and describe their own thinking as it occurs while engaging in an activity such as playing chess. In addition to textual data, qualitative researchers have made use of mute data (photos and artifacts; Harper, 2000).

The data produced from the various sources are assembled into a single text for the final analytic work. The subunits of the text are made up of the data that relate to each participant. The final text produced for a particular qualitative study may be quite massive. Kvale (1996) has noted that qualitative researchers about being confronted with having to analyze 1,000 pages of interview transcripts. He noted that such a large text is probably the result of unfocused interviewing aimed at the achievement of quantity rather than "on the content and the qualitative meaning of what was said" (Kvale, 1996, p. 179). Nevertheless, the production of data for a qualitative study typically does result in hundreds of pages of language data. The advent of the computer and word-processing have made the management of data more efficient. Although designed to assist in the analysis of data, programs such as Atlas/ti and Nud-kit (see Barry, 1998) also serve to keep the whole data text together in one computer file, allowing the researchers easy access to the material.

Although the ethical issues involved in qualitative research are the topic of another article in this issue (Haverkamp, 2005), I wanted to close with a few comments about the ethics of qualitative data collection. The kind of data required to study experience is from the personal lives of participants. The production of these data is not governed by a set of precise rules; the researcher has considerable leeway in the selection and process of developing these data. Thus, researchers need to be persistent in their judgments that the data present the perspectives of the participants. The trustworthiness of the data depends on the integrity and honesty of the research. Their production process needs to be transparent to the reviewers and to those who would use the findings in their practices. Foremost, the welfare of the participants must be the primary concern in the production of qualitative data. In addition to maintaining the confidentiality of participants, researchers need to proceed with sensitivity and concern for their needs and desires.

References
