3

Design I

Planning Research Projects

Introduction

In this chapter and in Chapter 4, we describe the design of qualitative research projects in communication. Design can be divided into two broad phases: *research project planning*, which is the process of formulating and shaping a research problem; and *research project implementation*, which encompasses a series of prefieldwork activities—negotiating access, becoming known to the participants, and developing a sampling strategy.

These phases are portrayed in the book as finished and "buttoned up" by the time the researcher is ready to start collecting data. This portrayal is realistic up to a point. Most design decisions are in fact made before going into the field. In actual practice, however, qualitative research is an evolving framework of strategies, tactics, and techniques. In the sage words of Lincoln and Guba (1985), "Design in the naturalistic sense . . . means planning for certain broad contingencies without, however, indicating exactly what will be done in relation to each" (p. 226). In other words, we plan on making decisions about issues we haven't yet encountered. We begin with a sense of purpose and some broad questions. We read the research literature, make some initial contacts, and find a way to move into a social world. We are soon ready to generate data. Otherwise, we cannot say with much certainty—in fact, we usually refrain from even trying to predict—what the study's findings will look like at the end of the process.

What we can say with certitude is that *reflexivity* is the heartbeat of a qualitative research project. Reflexivity—the process of engaging in mutual recognition of, and adaptation with, others—enables the researcher to manage the twisting, turning road of qualitative research. Importantly, the practice of reflexive research dispels the myth of objectivity in social science. By realizing that our work as researchers is always situated in relationships—in relationships with the research literature, with the people we are studying—we are able to get our bearings in a world of diverse, shifting, and often contentious, meanings. On a practical level, the enactment of reflexivity provides us with better data. We hear richer nuances in the voices of people. We gain a more well-developed understanding of the "contingencies" that Lincoln and Guba spoke of—that is, how one thing relates to another in a cultural scene.

Nothing a researcher does is more consequential than coming up with the idea that launches a new project. If the world of symbolic action is the subject matter of communication analysts, then the number of potential research ideas must be limitless. And so it is. The weight of one's decision to go forth with an idea is magnified by the sheer number of all of these alternative paths, as well as by the time, effort, and reputation that we'll eventually stake on it.

As daunting as this prospect sounds, there are systematic ways of finding and nurturing a new research idea. This chapter offers guidance on taking this crucial step. We will focus on four sources of idea formulation: personal experiences and opportunities; theory and the research literature; public issues; and funding priorities. Then we suggest ways of evaluating the value and feasibility of pursuing the idea further.

First, let's look at how one scholar—Renee Human, a graduate student who took Tom's course in qualitative methods—began to frame her own project. The story she tells serves as an excellent example of how careful, reflexive observations can be combined with conceptual thinking to arrive at an original idea.

"My City, My Society, and My Life": Renee's Story

Running continuously, predictably, along the roadways of our urban spaces, city buses have become an invisible part of the landscape. But what has made the bus invisible and unremarkable to most people may be the very "thing" that first attracts the researcher. French anthropologist Marc Auge recognized this as he descended into the subway system of Paris:

When we speak of ritual in respect to subway trips, and in a meaning different from what the term takes in common expressions when it is devalued, a simple synonym of habit, it would perhaps be on the basis of the following observation, which sums up the paradox and the interest of all ritual activity: recurrent, regular, and without surprise to all those who observe it or who more or less are associated with it, it is always unique and singular for each one of those actively involved. (Auge, 2002, p. 27)

Indeed, the ritual activity of the bus is underwhelming upon first encounter. On most days the passengers on the bus sit quietly, staring forward or out the window. Even in the odd rows that face each other at the back and front of the bus, eye contact is fleeting. Where then is the uniqueness, the singularity of which Auge wrote? It exists primarily in the individuals that at first are seen only as a collective. Sometimes it is the simple question about a stop. More rarely, it is a deliberate conversation.

Such is the case on a rainy, chilly day in October. A 20-something White male with a dirty T-shirt and blue stocking cap thumps down in the seat up a row and across the aisle from my own. Instead of facing forward, he stretches himself out across the row, his back resting on the window. Both defiant and guarded in his posture, his cool gaze takes in both the young man in the row behind him and me.

Noticing our backpacks, Stocking Cap asks, "You go to school here?"

"Yeah, I go to UK," says the other boy, a button-down, crew-cut type with a little pride and a little attitude. I nod yes and smile my assent briefly.

"I'm looking for a tech school," Stocking Cap states.

"There's Lexington Community College, right by the stadium," offers Crew Cut. "I went there, just graduated. 'Course now, it's, like, Bluegrass Community College."

"I want to do welding. What did you do?"

"Computers," says Crew Cut.

"Oh hey!" I say. "Do you know Darrell Queen?"

"Yeah, I had him for one class. My dad went to high school with him at Lafayette," he responds with a lopsided smile and some eye contact.

In front of me, a 60-something White male wearing fatigues and a big bushy white beard turns around. "Lafayette? What year? I was there in the sixties. Lexington was a lot smaller then, maybe I know him."

"I think my dad was there in the seventies," Crew Cut says, nodding his head and grinning at the old guy.

Stocking Cap turns to Crew Cut. "Do they teach welding at the community college?"

"I'm not sure—" he starts to say, but I jump in: "Not on that campus, but I think they do out at the Leestown campus."

Stocking Cap shrugs. "The problem is money. I'm at a halfway house."

A middle-aged African American woman in the row in front of him turns around to ask, "Are you at Shepherd House? I help out there sometimes."

"Yes, ma'am," he nods.

The elder, bearded man wags his head. "It's not right, you're trying to do the right thing and you're going to hit the red tape. That's what happened with me and the VA."

"Oh Lord, don't get me started on that," the woman says.

The talk goes on like this for a few minutes more. I stay on the periphery, my seat the farthest back on the right, taking notes initially but then putting the notebook away and watching. All of us lean in or move to the seat on the aisle to be closer to the conversation. Bodies turn toward each other and eye contact is made. We must look like the LexTran ad with the tagline: "Be a part of the LexTran community!" My stop comes up and I am sent away with hearty good-byes and exhortations to stay dry and safe.

Brief encounters like these punctuate the long silences that represent the typical bus ride. What is this instant coming together, only to pull apart again just as quickly and completely? Such events feel unquantifiable, singular, as Auge suggested, yet they echo the literal journey of the bus—a series of moments of both fixity and movement. We live these single events in a single place even as we fly down the street according to the cyclical bus schedule. Not only are such incidences worth examining as encounters between strangers, they are also worth considering in juxtaposition to the much more common periods of indifference and in relation to the spaces both inside and outside the bus. In the same way that the bus runs regularly, the constitution of passengers varies, a fluid membership changing from stop to stop. This brings to mind the unwritten maps of cultural space—the sometimes recognized (sometimes not) boundaries that divide "this" neighborhood from "that one." Riders get on or off within the neighborhoods of their identities. Yet, on the bus, those place identities may not be externalized for the collective consumption of other riders, even as they remain tightly bound internally to the individual.

Besides these cultural maps, do we not also maintain personal maps? Walter Benjamin thought so. Places, to Benjamin, are more than glass and stone. They are repositories for personal memories. Moving through a city, physical structures and landscapes trigger memories of past events and people; but more than that, the visual observation of those particular places triggers the imagination and emotion created through the interpretation of those memories (Benjamin, 1986). As the bus rolls past Central Baptist Hospital, I remember the one memory I had of the place—the joyous but painful birth of my only child. But who rides with me and looks out the window and, at that

exact moment, takes in the same brick-and-mortar structure, thinking back to the stress test that found nothing wrong? Or, perhaps tragically, relives the excruciating trip to the emergency room and the loss of someone due to a traffic accident? Can such extreme emotional memories encourage one to speak out in spontaneous joy—or another to silently turn inward in misery? "Surely it is our own life that we confront in taking the subway," Auge wrote, "and in more than one way" (p. 9).

Sources of Research Ideas

As Renee's story illustrates, research ideas can be found everywhere in the daily course of life. After all, what can be more mundane than riding a city bus? It goes on in a mind-numbing routine, day in, day out. But occasionally, something happens to break the spell. An inquisitive, keenly observant person, Renee Human found herself plunged into one of those moments and she immediately began to perceive a rich field of meanings hiding in plain sight. As the end of her story suggests, Renee began to turn these personal discoveries into a series of more deliberate questions about the meaning of community in transience.

Personal Experiences and Opportunities

What matters most in the process of discovery is not just the fact that we experience something but how we *problematize* our own or others' actions. This inelegant term refers to the act of "making problematic" the assumptions that underpin conscious experience. We do this by asking questions designed to claw tenaciously at the fabric of social reality. For example, how do the actors make their meanings "visible"? How do they judge an appropriate (or legitimate) course of action? How do they respond to an uncommon or unexpected action? (With appreciation for its creativity? With disapproval for its deviance? With indifference?) What is it about the local context that enabled this to happen? What social and cultural codes are in play?

The act of problematizing proceeds by putting brackets around, and asking pointed questions about, the taken-for-granted assumptions that usually pass silently under our gaze—questions that, if said out loud, might strike a listener as foolish, witless, or worse. If all else fails, if we're at a loss for what to ask next, there is always the root question of qualitative inquiry: *What is going on here?*

We cultivate this inquisitive style by being open to the possibilities of tone, stance, emotion, and interpretation in a given situation. We might sense an *irony*, a *contradiction*, a *confusion*, an *ambiguity*, or a *mystery* in the way an

event unfolds. *Humor* and *outrage* can also be useful attitudes to retrieve from one's bag of problematizing tools. Let's say we are studying a classroom. When the teacher leads the students in a discussion of race relations, she turns first to a person of color. We see the student bite her lip—or maybe her jaw tenses up—in what could be a sign of embarrassment. We can't yet be sure if this is a good interpretation. So we make a mental note of it and continue to observe. In instances like this, a disruption of our own sensibility is sometimes all we need to kick-start the opening cycle of questioning.

Encounters with different cultures or lifestyles, or experiments in new ways of doing things, can help liberate us from the confinements of ethno- (or ego-) centric thinking. The need for doing this is especially important for scholars. For all of their intellectual freedoms and sensitivity to people of diverse backgrounds, college campuses are largely sheltered from much of the strife, pain, and rough justice of the world. Of course, few of us would want it any other way. The larger point is this: the more exclusive our experience, the less acute our ability to make sense of people unlike ourselves. Many ethnographers do in fact thrive on new experiences (Goodall, 2000). Even for those who do not ride the rails with hoboes, volunteer at homeless shelters, or travel overseas on a regular basis, there are plenty of chances to sample the varied viewpoints, lifestyles, and moralities existing just beyond the borders of our own carefully tended spheres. For example, Tom and his wife habitually make the rounds of yard sales from April through October, a routine that takes them into the yards, and sometimes the homes, of people in nearly every neighborhood and socioeconomic bracket in the city of Lexington, offering not only amazing bargains but also many opportunities for conversation (albeit within a "safe" range of topics) and a close inspection of the American habitus.

Researchers often fuse their personal interests with their professional pursuits. For example, sociologist Clinton Sanders (1997) has made a career of doing ethnographies of social worlds in which he was already a participant—such as the illegal drug scene and the tattoo community; "doing fieldwork," he wrote, "has allowed me to call 'work' involvement in the kinds of activities and interests with which I would likely be engaged were it not the way I pursued my profession" (p. 487). Media studies scholar Sarah Thornton (1999) felt so strongly about studying her topic that she quit her tenured faculty position to take a job with an advertising agency. Taking this decisive step, she wrote, "[solved] two research problems in one fell swoop: funding and access. . . . Besides, time spent in the advertising industry would appease my longstanding curiosity about consumer culture and commerce. For me, ethnography is more than just a research method, it's a way of life" (p. 58).

Even if we do not go so far as to change career tracks for the sake of our research, we can still turn to our own identity concerns as a fertile seedbed for ideas. Scholars often gravitate toward people who are like them in important respects (e.g., women studying women on women's issues) or study topics that have gripped their imaginations for years (e.g., Bryan's interest in Cold War nuclear imagery). Many people experience struggles—especially with respect to issues of ethnicity, age, gender, class, politics, religion, or sexual orientation—that may be contemplated as potential research ideas (Conquergood, 1991). Some treat their research agenda as a way to explore issues related to their biographical selves. For example, many non-Euro-American graduate students go back home to study their nation of origin's sociopolitical or cultural issues (Bakalaki, 1997; Parameswaran, 2001). The fit of personal identity with a research idea also has methodological implications, because so much energy and artful care must be devoted to the presentation of one's self in the field. Arguably this effort is carried out more easily if we study a world to which we already feel connected.

This is not to say that ideas that go against the grain of one's identity should be avoided. Some researchers do consciously set out to study scenes that run counter to their own morality or political leanings, such as sociologist Kathleen Blee's study of women in American racist and anti-Semitic groups. (See Blee, 1998, for a reflective essay about her experience.) The fact that topics such as that one can be studied in a clear-eyed fashion is a testament to the researcher's resiliency and self-control. Occasionally, researchers must check aspects of their identity at the door of a field setting. Media studies scholar Antonio La Pastina (2006) wrote of having to hide his gay sexuality—thereby staying celibate—during his months of fieldwork in a remote Brazilian village, while studying the audience reception of telenovelas. "This absence of intimacy, coupled with my anxiety about having to be back in the closet, pushed me many times to the borders of a depressive state" (p. 726). To his credit, La Pastina was able to cope with the ordeal, finish his ethnography, and resume living in the United States free of this restraint.

The purposeful use of identity issues in research endeavors is not always revealed in publications. Perhaps some authors fear that such revelations will be branded as self-indulgent or as threats to the "impartiality" of their work. Even so, many do write openly about their relationships to the subjects—both human and topical—of their research. In Chapter 9, we will explore how expressions of personal investment can add real value to a qualitative text. For now, it is important to affirm that feeling passionate about your research—and finding your way in life at least in part through the pursuit of meaningful scholarship—is not just "okay," it is perhaps the best way to live the scholar's life.

Finally, the *opportunities* in our lives can be a source of ideas. There are abundant examples of researchers who found themselves in situations that subsequently became the settings for a study. Philipsen (1975) was a social worker in the south side of Chicago when he became intrigued with the male performances of speaking in that area. Novek (1995) had done several stints of teaching high school when she started asking questions about the students' culture and their communication styles. Lugosi (2006) patronized a bar in a suburban town in England when he realized that its "inclusive culture" would make a good study of commercial hospitality. As these examples suggest, a scene does not come equipped with questions; effort must still be devoted to crafting an idea that responds to a vital theoretical issue.

Theory and Research Literature

Renee Human's project followed a path familiar to many qualitative researchers. With the aid of works by Auge and Benjamin, she began to generate concepts that helped her interpret events in the bus—concepts about "the spaces both inside and outside the bus," "the unwritten maps of cultural space," and the "personal maps" ignited in us as we fly through the city. Renee soon cast the net of her readings more widely, to Georg Simmel's work on the tension between individuality and collectivism in metropolitan life and to social science studies on communication networks in urban spaces.

The concepts from these books and articles helped Renee, in the words of Alasuutari (1996), to "figure out a local structure of meanings, to 'crack' a case in such a way that it is possible to understand something that was odd or inconceivable at the outset" (p. 373). Before long (no doubt nudged by Tom's looming deadline), she was ready to write a research proposal.

Although you may be warned about closing off your options too early in a study—especially in the sense that "preordained theoretical perspectives or propositions may bias and limit the findings [of case study research]" (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 536)—it is also impossible to begin a study empty-headed. We can't help but bring certain habits of thought, including theoretical perspectives, with us into the field. Rather than rejecting these perspectives outright—or, for the sake of avoiding "bias," pretending they don't exist—it is more useful to think of them as *resources* for developing insights.

This view of theory as resource can be put into motion in several ways. Going into a project, knowledge of theory can serve as preparation for helping us to see what may be important to study in a social scene. It can provide us with *sensitizing concepts* (Bowen, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967): conceptual tools for foreshadowing the relevant features of the phenomenon we are about to face in the field. Later, concepts can help us in dealing with

the meanings of difficult or puzzling findings. Here, theorizing and fieldwork go hand in hand, "because the whole point [of qualitative research] is to come up with new viewpoints to the mundane reality organized by the natural attitude, and in doing so to find out new things about it" (Alasuutari, 1996, p. 373). At this stage, we ask the following: Is the theory (or concept) useful for helping me grasp the way members of this scene act and think? Is it useful for understanding this ritual? Is it useful in helping me find the connections between a group's beliefs and its social action? We can even "poach" our way from one theory to another, using "diverse, even contradictory, theories in order to advance an argument" (Anderson, 1996a, p. 7).

In other words, we can be flexible, inventive, and pragmatic in how we use the knowledge that comes from theoretical frameworks and their associated literatures. At the same time, we are not licensed to do just anything with a given theory. One of the reasons why theories exist in the first place is that they enable a *disciplined* way to think about a domain of social reality (Jensen, 2002). Another reason that they exist is, quite simply, they often *work*. That is, the terms and propositions of a theory, when applied to actual cases, can lead to confident explanations of the underlying mechanisms. Certainly a theory is unhelpful if it obscures our understanding of, or steers us away from, the local structure of meanings or if we try force an explanation where it plainly does not fit.

Often, at the outset of a project, an experienced investigator "knows what he or she doesn't know" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 209). What does this cryptic phrase mean? It means that by virtue of being well-read and up-to-date in a research specialty or subfield, an investigator learns about the big unanswered questions, the most pressing issues, and the most obvious gaps in the subfield's knowledge. So, the relevant research literature must be read—not in one sitting, of course, and probably not even in one term of school. Rather, we need to make a commitment to grasp the breadth and depth of the theory and empirical works pertinent to a topic, so that we can say confidently that we know what we don't know. And here's the payoff: the better understanding we have of what we don't know, the better we can foresee where the newest knowledge might lay. For example, Gibson and Papa (2000) noted the inconsistent attention paid to blue-collar workers in a variety of disciplines. "With a few notable exceptions," the authors wrote, "scholars have not focused on substantive communication behaviors of blue-collar workers. From a scholarly perspective, more research is needed to uncover what communication practices are uniquely manifest among blue-collar workers" (p. 69). This was one of their rationales for studying the communicative means by which blue-collar workers are assimilated in the organizational culture of a manufacturing plant.

Sometimes a review of the literature will tell the investigator that all of the previous theorizing and research activity has failed to bring clarity to an area. In justifying her qualitative study of television viewers' judgments of realism, Hall (2003) found many different—and irreconcilable—conceptualizations of "media realism." This analysis led to the rationale for her own study: "The contrasting conceptualizations of realism make it difficult to compare findings across studies and raise questions about whether researchers' understandings of realism comport with those held by audience members" (p. 625).

There are also times when the researcher uses a well-established theory to illuminate a communication phenomenon. For example, Carbaugh, Berry, and Nurmikari-Berry (2006) employed a theory of metacommunicative practice to investigate a Finnish cultural code for being silent. Their ethnography sought to address questions having to do with the performance of this event: "What activity is presumably at play when people speak together? What preferences or obligations does it bring to a social scene? And in turn, and similarly, what activity is presumably done when people are together in silence? What preferences are woven into such scenes?" (pp. 204–205).

Apart from giving theoretical direction, a review of the literature can supply you with background information about the topic; exemplars of studies similar to your own; as well as insights into research strategies, tactics, and techniques (Helmericks, Nelsen, & Unnithan, 1991; Rubin, Rubin, & Piele, 1999). A literature review can also promote a reflexive contemplation of the topic (McGhee, Marland, & Atkinson, 2007). That is, it can stimulate a critical look at your own assumptions and habits of thought. The research literature is mainly found in peer-reviewed journals; Table 3.1 displays many of the major journals in communication and related disciplines that regularly feature qualitative research. In addition to journals, state-of-the-art essays and overviews are published in research handbooks, edited volumes, and encyclopedias. These sources can be highly informative about the current, hotly contested issues or how the latest findings fit in the longer spans of intellectual history.

Your literature search can also be widened to include nonscholarly material: newspapers, popular magazines, the professional trade press, alternative periodicals, blogs, and so forth. This sort of open, eclectic approach can aid you in understanding how the phenomenon you wish to study has been described and socially valued in a variety of venues.

Another lively arena for scouting ideas is the conferences of scholarly associations, where the best and the brightest (and others) convene to present original research. Senior scholars tend to attract a lot of attention at these gatherings, but newcomers to the field are often the ones who "break out" new types of study, provocative arguments, and cutting-edge issues.

Table 3.1 Scholarly Journals That Regularly Feature Qualitative Studies

Communication
Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies
Communication, Culture, & Critique
Communication Education
Communication Review
Communication Theory
Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies
Critical Studies in Media Communication
Discourse & Communication
European Journal of Communication
Howard Journal of Communication
The Information Society
Journal of Applied Communication Research
Journal of Communication Inquiry
Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication
Journal of International and Intercultural Communication
Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research
Management Communication Quarterly
Media, Culture & Society
New Media and Society
Popular Communication
Qualitative Research Reports in Communication
Research on Language and Social Interaction
Studies in Visual Communication
Television & New Media
Text and Performance Quarterly
Western Journal of Communication
Written Communication

Anthropology
American Anthropologist
American Ethnologist
Anthropological Quarterly
Cultural Anthropology
Current Anthropology
Ethnology

Consumer Studies
Consumption, Markets & Culture
Journal of Consumer Culture
Journal of Consumer Research
Leisure Studies
Qualitative Market Research

Cultural Studies
Cultural Studies
Cultural Studies <=> Critical Methodologies

(Continued)

Table 3.1   (Continued)

European Journal of Cultural Studies
International Journal of Cultural Studies

Education
Anthropology and Education Quarterly
Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education
International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education

Language and Social Interaction
Critical Discourse Studies
Discourse Processes
Discourse and Society
International Journal of the Sociology of Language
Journal of Multicultural Discourses
Language in Society

Qualitative Research (Multidisciplinary)
Ethnography
Field Methods
Forum: Qualitative Social Research
International Journal of Qualitative Methods
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
Qualitative Inquiry
Qualitative Research
Studies in Qualitative Methodology

Organizational Studies
Academy of Management Journal
Culture and Organization
Journal of Management Studies
Organization Studies

Sociology
Qualitative Sociology
Sociological Quarterly
Symbolic Interaction

Other
Family Process
Human Studies
International Journal of Social Research Methodology
Journal of Ritual Studies
Public Culture
Qualitative Health Research
Qualitative Social Work
Semiotica
Signs
Theory and Society
Women's Studies International Forum

Note: For regular updates of journals related to this list, see these websites: The Qualitative Report: http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/calls.html; St. Louis University Qualitative Research Committee: http://www.slu.edu/organizations/qrc/QRjournals.htm.

It is important to recognize that the literature does not present a unified agenda. Although there may be strong and widespread opinions about what counts as the status quo or the most valuable scholarship in a given subfield, everyone is entitled to his or her view. Indeed, every person who references "the literature" has probably read a different set of works from anyone else and operates with different critical "antenna." However, with this freedom comes a responsibility: anyone who wishes to add his or her viewpoint to the scholarly conversation must stand ready to defend his or her views.

The knowledge embodied in this literature is also evolving, with each new published study altering the gestalt of the whole in some small way. Moreover, a study contains in unique microcosm a rendition of what the community is thinking and talking about—via its citations of papers, articles, and books; its recapitulation of standard arguments; and its arguments in favor of, or opposition to, someone else's position. The literature hums with this ongoing conversation among authors, a conversation with no barriers to entry except the (inevitably flawed) meritocracy of editorial review.

Public Problems

Qualitative inquiry in all of the social science disciplines has a long history of examining public problems. Many of the pathbreaking studies of the Chicago School of sociology, early in the twentieth century, focused on urban issues—especially race relations and crime (Kurtz, 1984). Later classic works, such as Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961), Elliott Liebow's *Tally's Corner* (1967), and Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977), depicted the lives of people struggling for dignity and self-determination— mental institution inmates, the Black underclass, and working-class boys, respectively. Ethnographies, generally, are well-suited for studying social life "from below." By digging deeply into the experiences of the poor, the disenfranchised, the misunderstood, and the outcast, qualitative studies may bring viewpoints to light that have been ignored or silenced. A recent ethnography in this tradition is Adelman and Frey's *The Fragile Community* (1996), which studied people living with AIDS and supporting each other as they come to terms with their mortality.

As we noted in Chapter 1, qualitative methods are used to address applied communication problems, such as the subjective and cultural meanings of health-related communication (Kreps, 2008). Clearly, qualitative study ideas can be found in many "quality of life" issues (Segrin, 2009). For example, Paveglio, Carroll, Absher, and Norton (2009) examined how residents of wildland-urban interface zones perceive the management of fire risk by the U.S. Forest Service. The role of a corporate outreach strategy in building community self-awareness is the subject of Edwards and Kreshel's (2008)

study of the Avon Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk event. And a series of focus group and in-depth interviews enabled Rogers, Singhal, and Thombre (2004) to identify Indian viewers' interpretations of HIV/AIDS messages embedded in the soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

Public problems also abound in the form of conflicts: legal controversies, political and social movements, media scandals, organizational crises, and so forth. Conflicts involve a struggle between two or more groups—often, an asymmetric struggle (with one side holding more power than the other)—regarding their goals, statuses, rights, and resources. To cite one example, the problem of abortion involves intense rivalry between pro-life and pro-choice advocates. In this conflict the lines are drawn sharply over such issues as the definition of life, the rights of women, the rights of the fetus, state and federal legislation, and the availability of medical services. A number of questions arise in the wake of such conflicts. How and why did they occur? What is at stake in the outcome? What arguments are voiced by the contending parties? How does the usage of language and other symbols inform the ways in which the conflict should be understood? For example, Press and Cole (1995) conducted focus group interviews with pro-life women in order to learn how they make sense of abortion-related media content and articulate "scientific facts."

The news media are a convenient source of stories about public problems—and most of these stories are packaged as conflicts. One would do well to keep in mind several things about this source. First, the degree of news coverage may have little relationship to an event's impact in people's lives—unless the coverage itself creates the impact. (Look no further than the wall-to-wall TV and web coverage that attended Michael Jackson's death in 2009.) Second, the media often give intense attention to the singularity of an event at the expense of the larger social, political, and historical forces surrounding it (e.g., the September 11 terrorist attacks). Third, some significant problems are almost totally ignored (e.g., the poor and the homeless). Finally, the media's agenda is nearly always a lagging indicator. That is, by the time the media recognize a problem (and label it as such), it has already been a problem for some period of time.

Funding Priorities

Academic institutions, particularly those designated as research universities, play a critical role in meeting the knowledge needs of federal and state governments and nonprofit foundations. Every year, large sums of grant money are dispensed to scholars who are willing and able to address these needs. (Companies in the private sector sometimes hire qualitative researchers, but

this is typically done on a contract basis rather than with grants.) As universities become less able to absorb the costs of supporting research internally, the goal of attracting extramural funding gains ever-greater importance.

Becoming adept at winning grants brings many rewards and opportunities to the qualitative researcher. Fieldwork is very time intensive, and a grant often frees up the investigator from teaching and other obligations. Grants are also used to pay for travel to research sites, hiring data collectors or transcribers, and other expenses. A grant is a prestigious achievement in itself, burnishing the reputations of both the scholar and the university. Deans and department chairs appreciate the "indirect costs" that come back to their units, and they often reward the grant-getter for these windfalls. In addition, grants give researchers a chance to work on "real-world" problems and, in some instances, collaborate with change agents in finding solutions to these problems. This can be a source of great satisfaction for those who want their research to have a visible, positive impact.

Unfortunately, qualitative research is often overlooked in the requests for proposals (RFPs) issued by funders. One reason is that qualitative projects are highly contextualized in a specific time, place, and people; thus the findings are not readily generalizable. Another reason has to do with the nature of qualitative research. Its flexible, open-ended process often means that the time to completion may be quite lengthy, as well as very difficult to estimate accurately. Moreover, the findings it produces are complex, nuanced, and dependent on the writing skill of the researcher. Quantitative research, on the other hand, is far better at studying short-term behavior or attitude changes in representative samples that are generalizable to a larger population—all key reasons for the generous funding enjoyed by investigators of communication campaigns, social marketing, community interventions, etc.

Despite these obstacles, some qualitative researchers do manage to get their studies funded. Among the keys to success are becoming educated about the grant application process and "networking" with successful grant-getters. An excellent guide to writing grant proposals is Paul G. Chapin's *Research Projects and Research Proposals: A Guide for Scientists Seeking Funding* (2004). Although many qualitative scholars—including those working in the critical, feminist, and postmodernist traditions—are unable (or unwilling) to adapt their expertise to the kinds of RFPs that come their way, others find ways of aligning their research agendas with the priorities of funders. Some funding agencies have recently shown interest in the kinds of detailed knowledge of cultures that qualitative inquiry can deliver. For example, the National Science Foundation sponsored a workshop on the epistemology, standards of rigor, and potential applications of qualitative inquiry (Ragin, Nagel, & White, 2004). This is an encouraging development, although it

remains to be seen whether the funding prospects for qualitative investigators will improve as a result.

Moving Toward a Commitment

Coming up with an idea—even a very worthy idea—doesn't necessarily mean you should do the project. Bryan and Tom have entertained many ideas over the years that have yet to go beyond written or mental notes and, speaking candidly, we know that most of them never will. Often the reason we don't act upon an idea has little to do with its merits. Maybe we don't yet feel ready to commit to a grueling schedule of interviews or fieldwork; maybe other projects command our attention; maybe we simply cannot muster enthusiasm for the idea. The overarching question—Is *this* the right project *now*, for *me*?—can be addressed in part by breaking it down into two component questions.

Can I sustain my interest in this project over the long haul? A qualitative project is often an adventuresome experience, and the process of discovering new insights can be truly exciting. However, it should not be overly romanticized. Fieldwork is not that different from other kinds of work in which one faces stretches of confusing, disagreeable, or apparently pointless activity. We have supervised projects that foundered because the students lost interest in what they set out to study. And some students just cannot tolerate the seeming banality of what they are studying. These observations do not just apply to students. Professional investigators also know that they must live with a project for a long while, and therefore they had better be able to ride out the bad or boring times as well as enjoy the peak moments. (Along with tolerance for ambiguity, the ability to squeeze meaning out of situations in which nothing noteworthy seems to be happening is another trait of successful qualitative researchers.) Yes, it is work. But to be good at this kind of work, the budding researcher should have—or soon acquire—an almost bottomless capacity for curiosity, perseverance, alertness, and learning all sorts of things from all sorts of people.

Will this project yield the type and quantity of "products" that will advance my professional goals? Not many of us have the luxury of engaging in qualitative research as a hobby—or can quit our day jobs to do it—so it makes sense to ask whether the end result is worth all of the time and effort. For projects funded by a grant, the final report (or the "deliverable," as it is often called) is usually due by a stipulated date. Therefore, this question is more pertinent for academic researchers whose unsponsored projects are not subject to external deadlines (although the ticking "tenure clock" can be a

very powerful enforcer of self-imposed deadlines). The major research product in the academy—indeed, the "gold standard" of quality work—is the peer-reviewed journal article. Untenured faculty members and graduate students, in particular, are encouraged to make their mark in journal publishing. Given the time it takes to finish a project, to say nothing of the time it can take for journal editors to make their decisions, qualitative researchers are always at some risk in the pressure-filled, publish-or-perish environment. Thus, it is good practice to try to optimize the yield of a qualitative project. One commonly used strategy is to plan from the outset on writing several articles from a project. It is often possible to "carve up" the data into several manuscripts or to analyze the same data using different theories. One can also write articles about, among other things, the methodological problems encountered in the field; the theoretical issues suggested by the study; and the ethical, pedagogical, practical, or policy implications of the study.

Scholars in tenured positions are freer to engage in complicated or open-ended projects; at this stage of a career, books and monographs become more viable products of research. More will be said in Chapter 8 about the strategies and politics of writing qualitative texts. Suffice it to say that a good idea should not only promise to be a contribution to knowledge; it should also lead to payoffs in the "currency" valued by the organization in which the author labors.

Evaluating the Scene

In principle, there is nothing that cannot be studied. A brilliant, well-trained qualitative researcher should be able to function as an intelligent "homing device" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or a cultural "detective" (Goodall, 2000), who can join any group, fit into any social space, become anyone's newest friend, learn any local idiom, and follow any tribal rule. However, neither Bryan nor Tom has ever met this superhero. The truth is there are no frictionless roles in real life. Nor are there any researchers with the wily, shape-shifting ability to perform all of the cultural hat tricks listed earlier. Inevitably our research goals will be compromised in some fashion (in terms of access, time, perspective, trust, etc.), but so long as these compromises don't unduly shackle our range of movement, they can actually be turned to our advantage.

Keeping this caveat firmly in mind, you should be able to ask, and hopefully answer with some degree of clarity, a couple of interrelated questions: Given the resources I have available to me, is this scene researchable? Can I be confident that a major investment of time, resources, and effort in this scene will be rewarded with a successful study?

First, we need to draw some important distinctions among three related terms: *field*, *site*, and *scene*. The term *field* refers to the general intersections of the topic and territory in which research takes place. It is the broad scope of theoretically relevant events in which researchers operate as working professionals. Bryan's field, for example, has included any organization whose members are talking about nuclear weapons and Tom's field any context in which media texts are socially constructed and interpreted. Researchers usually work more than one field over the course of their careers. The concept of *field* differs from that of *site* (or *setting*). This second term refers to a specific, local, physical place in which the researcher and the social actor coexist. Bryan, for example, has studied controversy surrounding exhibits located in the Bradbury Science Museum at the Los Alamos (New Mexico) National Laboratory. Tom has studied the controversy surrounding the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* at the sites of Universal Pictures (California), movie theaters, and many other venues. The aforementioned two terms can in turn be distinguished from a third, that of the *scene*. This final term refers to actors' self-defined scope of social action. Scene is a construct fashioned by participants as a frame for coordinating their immediate accomplishments. It is meaningful as a context in which a particular, recurring episode of social action takes place. At this level, Bryan has studied the struggle between "orthodox" and "progressive" groups over the form and content of nuclear-historical narratives, and Tom has studied the conflicts among film industry professionals, religious activists, and other social actors over the meanings of a cinematic text.

In playing out these distinctions, we see that a field can consist of many sites but that not all sites are equally valuable for studying the scenes that structure the social reality of a particular group. Researchers, then, must assess whether they have selected sites containing scenes that yield data responsive to the research questions associated with their fields. This process, often called "casing the scene," involves visiting potential sites in order to evaluate the people who inhabit them, the social activity that goes on there, and their overall suitability for being studied. In effect, researchers wish to answer the question, would these sites make useful cases for studying the scenes?

Casing the Scene

Scene casing, like any fieldwork procedure, calls for the researcher to assume a role that is sensible to the members. If it is a public site, the researcher can simply "hang out" as someone who has a right to be there: a customer, a citizen, a visitor, a spectator, a bus passenger. Of course, just because you have a right to be there doesn't mean that you will fit in. It is always wise to

recognize the unwritten rules of behavior for performing a public identity effectively. Consider, for example, the behaviors that pass for "normal" in a strip bar in Las Vegas, a city council meeting in Iowa, and a Little League game in Anytown, U.S.A. Web landscapes are also accessible to the casual visitor via search engines or hyperlink analysis tools (Thelwall, 2004) and visualization tools such as TouchGraph Google. The latter tool, for example, enables one to examine networks of sites that share keywords and/or are linked by third-party sites, "[which] means, from an ethnographer's point of view, that we can think of them as being grouped together, for whatever reason, by people enough involved in a field to be producing websites commenting on it" (Hine, 2007, p. 292). You can "lurk" within the site's public areas in order to explore its visual features, communication forums, and other notable aspects. The role of lurker (an Internet user who observes but does not participate) may not be a valued one in most online communities, but it is not actively discouraged either.

Places that are normally closed to the public—private homes, factories, clinic treatment rooms, and so forth—must be cased by other methods than just hanging out. Becoming a guest of the gatekeeper or sponsor is one way to evaluate a restricted setting. (See the section "Negotiating Access" in Chapter 4 about how to approach gatekeepers.) Once inside, a behind-the-scenes guided tour allows close-up views of the scene and often the chance to have one's questions answered by the host. An alternative to the tour is *shadowing* one or more members in their daily rounds. Shadowing is not only a means of evaluating a site prior to entry; it can also be employed later as a data-gathering technique (Lowrey, Otnes, & McGrath, 2005; Meunier & Vasquez, 2008). Whereas a tour is often contrived by the host for the purpose of putting the scene in its best light, shadowing permits more of an insider view because you are walking literally at the elbow of people who are themselves participating in the routines you wish to study. In any event, scene casing often requires comfortably adopting the kind of role that the members visualize for the researcher. For example, as a participant observer of family television viewing, Jordan (2006) found that the study participants—parents and children—ascribed various roles to her at the outset of fieldwork: The researcher as student, the researcher as person, the researcher as guest, and the researcher as negative agent. Such roles, she suggests, "provide a heuristic for the many evolving persona we take on as we enter the field" (p. 181).

Other scenes that one can join—such as clubs, associations, volunteer groups, schools, and online social media—can be cased in the role of a true member. Joining these memberships may entail little more than signing up, getting a username and password, paying a nominal fee, or just expressing an interest. In some cases, you can leverage the experiences or credentials

that you already possess. In "practice-close" research, for example, investigators who are (in)active members of a profession like nursing find that they can more easily gain entry to a nursing scene (Lykkeslet & Gjengedal, 2007). In other instances, a change of lifestyle or employment status (as in Sarah Thornton's career change, cited earlier), may be required. This is obviously a steeper price than many of us are willing to pay for admission; for others, it is fair market value for the privilege of entering a highly coveted scene.

If you are already a member of the scene, casing is done differently. Here, you turn the questioning back upon yourself: Will my co-workers accept me in a research role? Will they allow me to do this new "job"? Am I capable of detaching myself from my existing ideological, professional, and other affiliations within the scene? Will the demands of engaging in research interfere with what I have to do in my ongoing role—and vice versa? These issues of dual role positioning pose serious, but not insurmountable, challenges in executing a study properly.

The process of scene casing will often modify your research idea. In one of his first qualitative studies, Tom set out to study prison inmates' uses of media. Part of the study's rationale was that people living in a situation of long-term confinement relate to media content and technology in distinctive ways. Plainly, this rationale ruled out jails and detention centers as potential study sites. Tom also knew that he wanted a site with a fairly liberal media policy—whatever *that* meant. It was actually an abstract notion until he began to look at possible sites. Eventually he chose a medium-security prison that gave its inmates access to cable television, magazine subscriptions, and even personal computers. During a walking tour of the facility, he learned that the officers had developed techniques—some of them involving the use of media—for trying to avert situations of racial conflict in the inmate population. As a result of this information, the study's focus on the multicultural aspects of prison life grew larger.

Assessing Feasibility

The scene-casing process also helps answer the question of *feasibility*. Feasibility is the decision space where two broad sets of demands—one set associated with the site, the other with the researcher—come together. As Schatzman and Strauss (1973) note, a researcher determines whether a study is feasible by assessing "some of [the site's] presenting properties (size, population, complexity, spatial scatter, etc.) against his [or her] own resources of time, mobility, skills, and whatever else it takes to do the job" (p. 19).

Let's briefly consider a few feasibility challenges that qualitative researchers have faced:

Can we collect, read, and conceptually grasp the thousands of messages generated by virtual fan communities? (Menon, 2007)

Can we get inside the private/public worlds experienced by Apple iPod users? (Bull, 2005)

Can we study the interpersonal dilemmas and struggles of people involved in stressful work, like 911 emergency call centers? (Tracy & Tracy, 1998)

Can we understand what it is like to work in scenes of physical danger and low tolerance for error, such as an aircraft carrier flight crew? (Weick & Roberts, 1993)

You might take comfort from the fact that all of these scenes were successfully studied. However, as we cautioned earlier, do not make the mistake of thinking that anyone can study any scene. Failed projects are almost never published or even discussed publicly (although there are surely many "shipwrecks" out there). It may be helpful to think about feasibility in terms of a sliding scale: as the demands of a site's presenting properties grow larger—in terms of size, population, spatial scatter, complexity—one's ability to cover *all* of the action generally decreases. The questions then become: How much of it can I study? What must I leave out? On the other hand, if the demands of a site are relatively light, the researcher should be able to manage, if not enlarge, the study's focus.

Time is always a critical resource. A shortage of time imposes limits on our ability to grasp a scene's practices and performances. This problem grows to serious proportions if the scene is complex and far-flung—for example, the impact of globalization on media audiences. Fieldwork in a highly demanding scene puts a strain on your ability to collect data. It also steals time from writing fieldnotes, studying the notes, and the other obligations of a project. As a result, the idea may have to be scaled back. Instead of trying to study globalization in all of its complex manifestations, perhaps studying one cultural site and one form of globalized media content provides a modest—yet still important—framework for ethnography (Rao, 2007). Increasingly, researchers deal with these challenges of scale and complexity by doing fieldwork in a punctuated fashion over longer periods of time (Hannerz, 2003) or by using intermediary technologies, like phones, e-mail, and conferencing, to get in touch with distant participants.

It is worth noting that scene complexity is not just manifested in physical characteristics. A scene may be socially, culturally, or ideologically complex as well. For example, one of Tom's former students, Christine Tigas, studied pagan identity in a Unitarian church (Tigas, 2006). The pagans made up a small percentage of the total church membership, but the task of identifying

paganism as a coherent meaning system—in which expressions of belief acted as a presenting property—proved to be very challenging, as Christine wrote:

> Rosemary, one of the most active members of the group, was an ordained minister in the "Church of Ancient Paths," a pantheistic pagan church with leanings toward Wicca. There were a couple of Druids and Celtics. Shawna identified herself as a "Greco-Roman," a path that practices the worship of ancient Greek and Roman gods. One elderly woman was a practitioner of "Orisha," a tradition from West Africa that worships one or more embodiments of the god Olorun and places key importance on ancestors and cultural heroes . . . An older man, who had taken a particular interest in my study, called himself an "Arthurian-Gardenarian." When I told him that I had never heard of that path and asked him how many members it had, he said there were two—him and his teacher. His path was a combination of a belief system based on Arthurian legend and the legacy of a founder of modern Wicca, Gerald Gardner.

Clearly, there are many variations on the notion of "pagan." But by reading these accounts in the context of the Unitarian church's rhetoric about spiritual "paths," she began to grasp the common threads that made paganism a coherent sign of identity.

It is also important to evaluate the social rhythms of a scene. Most scenes are very predictable—so predictable that it is a simple matter to gauge whether and when one can do research. One of Tom's former students, Bruce Berger (1998), wanted to study the world of "simulcast racing and betting, who [the gamblers] are and why they are here, and what is the meaning of here in the context of everywhere else in their lives" (p. 2). Fortunately, a season of simulcast racing was already in progress at Lexington's Red Mile track. Thus, it was easy for Bruce to plan 20 evenings of observing a particular group of gamblers.

However, some events happen so rarely or unpredictably that it is well-nigh impossible to set up a research schedule. Another one of Tom's former students wanted to study how Hispanic women communicate their health problems to English-speaking health care providers. It turned out that Hispanics visited the clinics much less often than others. Due to this lack of predictable flow of Hispanic women at clinics, the student changed her focus to studying the health care providers and their perceptions of Hispanic women's communication issues.

Another key presenting property is the cultural codes that are enacted in a scene. Cultural codes are the sets of knowledge that people use to perform their roles in a scene. Codes constitute and regulate different orders of conduct, such as occupational (e.g., technical codes), public interpersonal

(e.g., politeness codes), private interpersonal (e.g., relational codes), and media-related conduct (e.g., interpretive codes), among others. Some codes are tacit and known widely—i.e., what "everyone" should know. For example, almost everyone these days knows how to navigate the Internet. Other forms of coded knowledge are less widely shared. Many fewer people know how to utilize the Internet for day-trading in the stock market or how to evaluate the credibility of rumors in the online world.

Thus, researchers should try to assess the types or layers of coded knowledge that exist in a scene. Some codes are organized in terms of a hierarchy. A college dean, for example, presumably has a richer store of cultural capital than faculty members by virtue of his or her varied interactions with students, faculty, administrators, professional constituencies, and so forth. (The term "cultural capital" refers to the use value of the coded knowledge that one has access to.) However, normal status does not always neatly match up with cultural capital. It is possible that certain people in lower-status occupations (e.g., the textbook buyer, the building janitor) will see a side of faculty life rarely seen by others. Some people are reluctant to talk about the codes that inform their behavior, often for reasons that make sense in their local situations. Bruce Berger found deceit to be rampant at the simulcast racing scene. But trying to decode how gamblers lie to each other was a delicate matter because lies are part of the strategy they use to gain advantage over one another. They felt disclosing this knowledge to be tantamount to losing cultural capital.

Coded knowledge can also arise and flourish in a cohort group. Take the example of young people who belong to music subcultures—the language they use, the media skills they practice, the clothes they wear, the music tastes they cultivate, the social-media networks they create (e.g., Bloustien, 2007). Many researchers of the baby boomer generation would probably have trouble at first deciphering these codes. Scarce cultural capital is one reason why cross-generational (or cross-ethnic, cross-gender, etc.) studies can be challenging. The use of a research team—in which member roles in a project vary by age, gender, ethnicity, or other characteristics—is one solution for managing these researcher-scene differences.

Consulting Colleagues, Mentors, and Experts

The evaluation of research sites and cultural scenes is also aided by consultations with colleagues, mentors, and experts, especially when the kind of feedback we need can only come from the lively give-and-take of a conversation. Scholarly conventions, for example, are events in which we meet our colleagues face-to-face to talk about projects—ours, theirs, or the ones we

might work on together. Thanks to the Internet, we can get in touch with scholars at any time via e-mails, text messages, or queries posted to lists like the National Communication Association's Ethnography Division. Colleagues can act as sounding boards or support groups (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991). You might go to one colleague for her methodological acumen and to another for help with ethics' issues. In the best spirit of these consultations, the advice should be given freely and taken freely (or not taken at all).

Mentoring is another excellent arena for sorting out research issues. The apprenticeship nature of graduate student work is the academic prototype for the mentor-mentee relationship. Mentoring can also be conducted in many other types of relationships. The protected intimacy of a mentoring session is ideal for learning through dialogue, receiving encouragement, and reflecting on the vexing identity concerns of fieldwork (Chawla & Rawlins, 2004).

The advice of professional experts can also be sought out. Individuals with expertise in the scenes under study have come to the aid of your authors more than once—and for this generous assistance, they are thankful. For a study on media usage among prison inmates, Tom consulted with two faculty members at his university. One regularly donated his time and services to the prison and was able to sketch a verbal picture of inmate life. The other was a criminal justice professor who suggested ways of scripting an access approach to the prison officials. In his study of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Tom talked with people who had no direct connection with the film but were able to provide much-needed context—for example, a Miramax film executive who had experience in marketing controversial movies, a member of a Christian media ministry in Hollywood, and a couple of former political advance people. Such dialogues can shorten your learning curve in certain areas and stimulate new ways of thinking about the subject of research.

Developing Emic and Etic Perspectives

As you continue to take stock of a scene, a perceptible change occurs in your grasp of the social life under study. You begin to perceive it through *emic* and *etic* analytic lenses. Pelto and Pelto (1978) characterize *emic* analysis by the injunction that "the native's categorization of behavior is the only correct one" (p. 56). "Correct," in this sense, means that whatever is true or real for the culture member is the correct categorization of truth or reality in that instance. When we achieve an emic competency, we are able to describe the actors' world through the meanings they attribute to their own culture and communications. Metaphorically speaking, we not only take a walk in their shoes, we also understand what shoes mean to them. For example, in Tom's

study of political advance teams, he often asked the question, what is "good advance"? One of his first informants responded this way:

> A good advance person is like a terrier on a towel. You know how when you move the towel back and forth, it won't let go? A good advance person is a lot like that. They get a hold of whatever that project is, and they twist it every way they can, looking at it, trying to figure out how to make it better, trying to figure out everything that could possibly go wrong, trying to figure out how to fix that problem ahead of time.

The "terrier on a towel" analogy is not just a vivid quote—although it is certainly that. It also discloses one "native's categorization" of what good advance is. As a result of this rich metaphor, Tom acquired a glimmer of emic competency.

When we take an etic analytic view of a scene, we evaluate it through the conceptual categories provided by our disciplinary knowledge and theory. When Tom first applied the etic approach to the question of "good advance," he was already aware that the scholarly literature on this subject was thin. He then reviewed the literature on closely related work systems, such as crisis management, disaster relief teams, and postmodern consultancies. He found that they all had certain characteristics in common: a low tolerance for failure, a preference for negotiation and *ad hoc* solutions over formal rationality, interdependence over self-sufficiency, and an ethos of trust over turf protection. This analysis proved to be useful for drafting a research proposal, coming up with an interview guide, and anticipating conversations with his interview subjects.

It takes time to grasp the content and structure of people's subjectivity. That is why emic competency emerges gradually (although a project's journey is usually punctuated by "ah-ha" moments of sudden clarity). The etic view is closely aligned with the site-as-field perspective, while the emic view favors a site-as-scene perspective. In truth, they go together. The combined use of emic and etic conceptual lenses yields a binocular—and thus multidimensional— view of culture (Lindlof, 2008a) and helps the researcher establish a prolonged contact with the scene.

Conclusion

A new idea for research takes root in several different soils. The literature grounds it in layers of knowledge, intellectual issues, and debates about the most pressing questions. Further helping to germinate the idea are current social problems and the priorities of funding agencies. But the catalytic agent

that enables it to grow to maturity is our own sense of personal investment. With so many potential ideas vying for our attention, we can only choose one at a time—and that one is usually a sign of both professional curiosity and a personal longing to gain knowledge. After determining the potential feasibility of this idea, we are ready to commit ourselves to the research effort. The next phase of design—the implementation of a research project—is explored in Chapter 4.

Exercises

1. A prominent source of research ideas is our own personal experiences. Researchers often begin a project—or even an entire research program spanning many years—from their explorations of a personal memory, issue, dilemma, or current involvement. Think of at least one experience you have had that might form the basis of a qualitative communication research study.

- What significance does it hold for you?
- Why did you think of it as a potential research topic?
- Who else (types of people) may have had a similar experience? What characteristics do these people have in common?
- What kinds of "research questions" might develop out of this idea? Is there a research literature—or are there other sources (including novels, biographies, poems, films, etc.)—that would help you understand this experience further?

2. In this chapter, we discussed the distinctions among field, site, and scene. As you begin to gather information about a potential study, try to define your study concretely in terms of scene, field, and site(s). Do you think a member of this scene would agree with your descriptions? What role does emic and etic competency play in helping you conceptualize the social arena of your research as a scene or as a site?