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# Qualitative Research and the Art of Learning to See

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When we do scientific research, we strive for reasoned explanation, representational accuracy, and certainty. When we do art, we strive for arousal, vividness, and interpretive creativity. When we do qualitative research, we do science and art.

Although we uphold a tradition of keeping art and science separate, my starting point for this book is that art and science are inseparable when we do qualitative research. The aim of this book is to open pathways for readers to become good qualitative researchers. In order to get there, I believe it is as important to be creative as it is to be analytical, to be passionate as well as reasoned, to feel as well as to think, and to arouse while offering explanation.

Most of my training as a graduate student, and indeed much of my subsequent reading about qualitative methods, has occurred within the scientific domain. Perhaps the long-standing identity crisis of qualitative research as being on the margins of science has resulted in a more deliberate effort to find legitimacy through the language of science. Learning about qualitative methods in the language of science, however, bypasses the cultivation of what I believe to be some of the most essential skills in being a successful qualitative researcher; skills that have to do with the senses, intuition, and the spirit of a person. Hence, my starting point is qualitative research as an artistic endeavor. It is not until people cultivate an awareness of their own aesthetic capability that they can then take full advantage of the procedures of science.

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The focus of this book is on providing a set of systematic guidelines that can be used to conduct qualitative research on individuals and families. However, the effectiveness of these guidelines and methodological procedures is contingent on first learning how to perceive the world that is immediately before us. As a result, this first chapter focuses on perception and the use of our senses as being the most important skills to learn. Although I place an emphasis on the visual aspects of perception through use of the term *seeing* in this chapter, qualitative research must necessarily engage all of the senses. As Allen (2000) reminds us, our challenge as researchers is to come to our senses so that we can fully listen to the voices of individuals and families and expand our repertoires of knowledge generation to include emotional sensitivity, intuitive understanding, and reflective awareness.

### Learning to See

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. (Albert Einstein, 1990)

Great poets, artists, and writers stand out because of what they were able to see. Great researchers stand out because of what they are able to see. The most important skill that we can cultivate when doing qualitative work is learning how to see. Learning to see involves the awakening of all our senses so that we become aware of sound, smell, movement, shape, and color.

When Annie Dillard (1974/1985) wrote her Pulitzer prize-winning book called *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, she instructed us about what it means to see. This is a book that celebrates the artful craft of rich description, where the smallest details of her colored environment are brought to life in the mind of the reader. She offers this description while sitting on a sycamore log bridge over Tinker Creek with the sunset at her back:

I was watching the shiners the size of minnows who were feeding over the muddy sand in skittery schools. Again and again, one first, then another, turned for a split second across the current and flash! The sun shot out from its silver side. I couldn't watch for it. It was always just happening somewhere else, and it drew my vision just as it disappeared: flash, like a sudden dazzle of the thinnest blade, a sparking over a dun and olive ground at chance intervals from every direction. (pp. 31–32)

When I read a passage like this, I am blissfully bestowed with the eyes of a child crouched on the shore gazing into the pool with an unencumbered awareness of flashing shapes and movements. My other senses also come alive—I feel the sun on my shoulder, the taste of the streamside air, and the sound of the breeze as it brushes the long grass. For me, the success of the writing is in the power of the passage to bring me into that world and out of mine. To be able to see the pond as she saw it, to be in that place without getting my feet muddy, was testimony to the power of the art.

Doris McCarthy has spent a lifetime learning to paint Canadian landscapes. Now in her 80s, she has cultivated the art of seeing her physical world. As she reflected on her career as an artist, seeing was central to her success. In an interview, she had this to say:

I am very alert visually to what's going on, and I find that's why I am a landscape painter. . . . All I need is to be away from people, and I can sit down and take a look at a rock or a tree or a puddle and start to see it, translate it into paint. (*Globe and Mail*, February 23, 2002, p. R2).

For McCarthy, really being able to see involves capitalizing on her visual alertness followed by the deliberate effort to see her subject matter in a fuller and more focused manner.

James Joyce (1964), in his classic novel *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, through the voice of Stephen, the protagonist, talks about art as the “human disposition of sensible or intelligible matter for an esthetic end” (p. 211). The challenge, as he goes on to articulate, is to

try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again, from the gross earth or what it brings forth, from sound and shape and colour which are prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand. . . . (p. 211)

The intersection between art and the intellect is captured in the assertion by Stephen that truth and beauty are kin: “Truth is beheld by the intellect which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the intelligible; beauty is beheld by the imagination which is appeased by the most satisfying relations of the sensible.”

Learning to see is the foundation for becoming an effective qualitative researcher. When we “see,” we make ourselves present and open fully our senses to the scene at hand. We see, we listen, we feel, and we seek to be attentive to the unfolding moment. As John Berger (1972) says in *Ways of*

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*Seeing*, seeing comes before words and establishes our place in the surrounding world. It is an ongoing process wherein the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled (Berger, 1972).

### The Paradox of Learning to See

At the heart of learning to see is a paradox between the deliberate cultivation of “seeing” (or listening) skills and the surrender of all effort to see in a particular manner. This a tension between the use of discipline to get us to a point of attentiveness and the release of mental effort, strategizing, and monitoring in order to see what is actually there. The paradox of learning to see is not unlike the paradox of learning to meditate. In order to be successful at the art of meditating, we must first commit ourselves to practice. Practice involves setting aside time on a regular basis, having a series of disciplined internal conversations about showing up, and then preparing our bodies in the physical space through the staging of sound, light, and the positioning of our body. Once we have prepared ourselves to meditate, the challenge shifts from the deliberate orchestration of conditions to the deliberate state of surrender that is required in order to be in the moment. We shift from controlling the conditions of our meditation to a position of pure observer. The challenge now is not to make the moment happen but to attend to the experience of the present as it unfolds. In meditation, we attend to our breathing and the sensations of our body. As thoughts arise, we watch them pass our horizon like clouds. Meditation is not so much about clearing the mind as it is about attending to the experience of living and breathing in the moment.

As qualitative researchers, we share the fundamental aim of attending to the experience of living. As social scientists, our goal is to serve in the process of understanding how life is. As students of human development and family relationships, we want to know about the fundamental processes of life: processes of change, how we relate to and are affected by our environments, and how we live in relationships. In order to accomplish this task and be able to communicate to others how life is and how it works, our primary challenge becomes how to be attentive to life as we encounter it. Like students of meditation, as researchers we must also commit ourselves to practice. It involves the discipline of learning how to observe, how to situate ourselves in order to see most effectively, and the commitment to return again and again to our observations in order to build confidence in our understandings. In the cradle of that discipline, however, we must learn to clear our minds and attend to the shapes, patterns, sounds, smells, and colors of our participants’ worlds.

In the Zen tradition, they speak about the cultivation of the “beginner’s mind.” There are three important steps in the cultivation of the beginner’s mind: attention, attention, and attention. In our everyday lives of making decisions, navigating complex work demands, and negotiating interpersonal relationships, we rely on complex minds that store information, solve problems, and strategize for efficiency of effort. Busy minds are essential for survival in complex social environments and, as a result, we spend most of our energy adapting to increasing complexity. A busy mind is the default setting in a complex culture. Attention in the busy mind is often compromised by preoccupation with plans, expectations, and decisions. To foster a “beginner’s mind” is to learn how to see an experience for the first time unencumbered by past experiences or future expectations. It is to see reality as it is presented to us in the present.

In family therapy, therapists may be encouraged take a position of “not-knowing,” which provides a useful parallel for how we approach participants in qualitative research settings. “Not knowing,” like the beginner’s mind, refers to the belief that the therapist does not have access to privileged information, can never fully understand another person, and always needs to learn more about what was, or what was not said (Anderson, 2005). It is about being humble, engaging in respectful listening, and letting the client lead. It does not mean, however, that the therapist (or the researcher!) knows nothing or asks nothing—but rather that the position taken is one of offering questions and speculations but in a manner that “portrays respect for, and openness to the other and to newness” (p. 503).

In order to be a good qualitative researcher, one of our most important challenges is to cultivate the beginner’s mind and a stance of “not knowing” so that we can see the reality of the world as it emerges for the first time. Accordingly, there are three steps involved: attention, attention, and attention! Developing our attention is the precondition for the development of all other qualitative skills. If qualitative research finds its strength in discovery, then it is only by allowing ourselves to see reality anew that we can make a contribution to the ongoing discovery of everyday reality. Fortunately, as students of lived experience, we are presented with an endless supply of emerging realities.

To shift from the default setting of a complex mind to a beginner’s mind is a significant challenge. Complex minds make it difficult to see for many reasons. Most significant among these is our own embeddedness in the experiential life world. In spite of our best efforts, whether they be preparing to meditate or to enter into a qualitative interview, we bring with us our habits, our learned social skills, and a set of personality characteristics that predispose us to act in certain ways. When we do field work of any kind,

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we may intend to fully attend to the experience that we are interested in understanding, but we must also accept our position as active agents in the interactive setting. We rely on our complex minds to negotiate these settings while at the same time seeking to attend to the reality of participants' experience as it unfolds. The paradox of learning to see means that we need to manage the tension between our predispositions to act in certain ways and our desire to attend to the newness of the situation.

Complex minds make it difficult to see because of our attachments to preferred ways of seeing the world. In the family therapy literature, for example, narrative approaches direct us to examine the way that dominant stories monopolize our ways of seeing ourselves and our relationships. We are attached to these stories and as a result, it becomes very difficult to see ourselves or others in any other way. Therapy can guide family members to construct new stories that help them to see their experience in a different light. Dominant stories hinder how we see because of our need to fit emerging reality into previously established patterns of perception. Learning to see the "new" means being mindful of the automatic desire to fit experience into our dominant stories. When we do observations as part of our research, we need to be mindful of how our own dominant stories and attachments to certain types of knowledge affect the way we see our participants' stories. As researchers, it is important to be attentive to how participants present the stories of their lives in ways that both fit within and fall outside of the dominant stories.

The familiarity of our social world also hinders our ability to observe the world anew. We carry with us frames of relevancy and familiarity that bring with them expectations for how reality will appear. I once had the experience of going to Northern Ontario in the autumn to see the trees change color. I was particularly keen to see all of the fall colors: bright reds, oranges, and yellows. On the day I arrived, I went for a walk in the forest and was startled by the fact that the dominant color I was seeing was green. We usually look for and see green in the spring. But up there, the wind had blown down most of the maple leaves and what stood out on the brown forest floor were beautiful green ferns. I found myself searching for orange because that's what I wanted to see, but surprisingly, I kept coming back to green. My experience of disappointment in relation to orange was balanced by an experience of surprise at seeing green. When we do qualitative research, surprises such as this are usually contingent on our ability to get beyond what we expect to see. In this light, I have learned to take experiences of surprise very seriously. Surprise serves as a corrective check on our tendency toward habituation. Surprise reminds us to pay attention and look closely.

In phenomenology, terms such as *taken-for-granted reality* and *typification* help us to understand how this works. Through development, we accumulate a stock of knowledge that gives everyday experience a measure of predictability. We begin to assume that experiences we anticipate in the future will be similar in character to experiences we have had in the past. Through this process of recurring and predictable life events, we begin to assume or “take for granted” that there will be continuity in everyday experience. Typification is the means by which we make our entry into the future secure: We are able to enter into the unfolding experience of everyday reality because of our knowledge of typical past events. Although the process of typification serves us as an essential means for “gearing into the everyday life world” (i.e., engaging in the predictability of everyday reality), it can also blind us to experiences that are rooted in very different typifications. bell hooks (1992), for example, talks about the way that whiteness is represented in the black imagination. Although there is a long tradition of white ethnographers describing and making assumptions about black culture, there is little in the written record that focuses on the way that blacks see white culture. As hooks describes these perceptions, it is quickly apparent that these are radically different typifications that are rooted in generational experiences of domination and colonialism and felt through a lingering experience of racist terror and anguish. When we do qualitative research, we want to understand the experience of the other but are caught in our own existential practice of trying to fit that experience into our own schemes of relevancy and typification. We are always limited by our own schemes of relevancy and typification. The key is to be aware of these limitations, to reflect on them as we endeavor to understand the other, and to know when these are of such a radically different nature that they surpass our ability to understand or see clearly.

## Paradox of Control and Our Ability to See

Central to the paradox of learning to see is the paradox of control. Like meditation, learning to see in qualitative research means using strategies of deliberate control and strategies that allow for the release of control. Annie Dillard likens this tension to the experience of walking with and without a camera. Walking with a camera involves calculated, controlled measures associated with composition, light, and position. Walking without a camera, there is a submission to the “come what may” contingencies of the experience. In Dillard’s (1972) own words, “my shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut” (p. 31). Without the camera,

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she becomes “above all, an unscrupulous observer” (p. 31). When we do qualitative research, we straddle this tension—at times working the camera to manipulate conditions and compose the shot; at other times, turning off the camera and being fully present to the vignette before us.

This tension of control is often apparent when we seek to conduct observation studies in public spaces. The challenges to the senses become quickly apparent. What family or families should I look at? What am I missing? How do I look at them and are they looking at me? How can I begin to separate sound from noise? These are tensions that straddle the need to control our frame of reference and yet open ourselves to the full complexity and sensual stimulation of the scene at hand.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is learning how to surrender control so that we can see more effectively. As qualitative social scientists striving for a respected methodology, we fill ourselves with anxieties about “doing it right.” In contrast to the mathematical principles of statistical research, qualitative research is steeped in a tradition of guidelines rather than prescriptions, reflections on roles rather than rules, and the construction of anecdotes rather than answers. These practices make the accomplishment of certainty difficult and in spite of efforts to do it right, leave us as researchers with an unsettled edginess. In response to this lingering state of uncertainty, there are many strategies we use to try to increase control in our research practices. We have borrowed from the language of positivism to make our procedures “systematic” in order to ensure that our results are “robust.” We reference the scientific literature to justify and legitimate what we do; we conduct audit trails (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and have adopted the principles of reliability and validity in our work. We secretly uphold the model of the scientific researcher who is fully in control: “designing” the study, “manipulating” the data, and “drawing” conclusions. These efforts at increasing control may enhance the credibility of what we do, but they do not necessarily enhance our ability to see clearly the lived experience that lies before us.

To empty one's mind of all thought and refill the void with a spirit greater than oneself is to extend the mind into a realm not accessible by the conventional processes of reason. (Hill, 1966)

Learning how to relinquish control as a way to enhance our ability to see does not mean that we throw out the social scientific practices that seek to enhance control. Rather, we use those practices of control as the basis upon which we juxtapose our efforts to release control. Like walking with



a camera, we calculate when, where, and how we will take the picture; once we arrive, we need to set the camera aside to see more fully the possibilities that are present. Allowing ourselves to let go of control when we are at the active edge of data collection comes with both advantages and disadvantages. On the surface, the disadvantages may be more apparent: We are aware of feeling anxious about lack of structure (e.g., when we conduct interviews without preset questions), we may feel vulnerable as a result of being perceived as unprepared or unprofessional, and we may feel unsure about what we are discovering or what we will find next. On the other hand, there are many advantages to loosening control: We allow our eyes to open wide to unanticipated responses as well as anticipated ones; we leave open the possibility of discovering the right questions to ask, not just the questions we had prepared; and we have a better chance of allowing ourselves to go beyond our preconceived expectations about the nature of their experience.

The advantages of releasing control became apparent to me in research that I carried out on the meaning of providing care. Influenced by the work of Karen Davies (1994), I became aware of how we must think differently about clock time that aims at productivity and efficiency and care time that must be responsive to the unpredictable needs of others. We can control clock time through the use of schedules, calendars, and all manner of time management strategies; it is more difficult to control time when we are asked to respond to the rather sporadic needs of a child who gets sick at inopportune times or the desperate call in the middle of the night from a good friend who suffers from mental illness. Care time involves surrender to the immediate experience of the other and involves a loosening of control over our need to orchestrate our everyday temporal lives. When we do qualitative research, we must contend with this same dialectic between the use of strategies of control and strategies of responsiveness. Like clock time, our research designs provide a structure within which to work; like care time, we are called to pay attention to the unanticipated turns of our participants' stories.

Control is like a toggle switch that becomes part of our practice as qualitative researchers. Like the practice of meditation, or shifting between clock time and care time, maintaining and releasing control is a central dynamic in our effort to understand the experience of life around us. Our success rests in the energy of the paradox itself, not in the negation of one by the other. In keeping with this, it is important to differentiate this approach of toggling control from the emphasis that has been placed on *tabula rasa* in the qualitative tradition. For example, in some versions of grounded theory methodology, the ideal of approaching social reality with a blank mind is upheld. Specifically, literature reviews, accounts of

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theoretical influences, and reflections on experience are discouraged as contaminating influences on the clean receipt of our participants' experience. Although the suspension of preconceived ideas and influences is a laudable goal, it may be as impractical as expecting a calm and unfettered mind when we sit ourselves down to meditate. For those of us who have tried meditation, we know to expect trees full of chattering monkeys. The solution is to stay on the edge between control and releasing control: on the one hand, drawing on the principles of discipline to position ourselves by setting the research stage; on the other hand, resting confidently in our efforts to set the frame for our inquiry and loosening our control in order to see clearly. Rather than suspending preconceived ideas, we hold them in tension with our desire to open ourselves to the reality that is presented to us. Managing control in qualitative research involves holding in place the incompatible expectations of orchestration and surrender, discipline and presence.

### **Lessons From the Art World: Positioning Ourselves to See Fully**

As for art . . . it is an incomplete, never-ending narrative of human pains and disappointments, of the world as man experiences it . . . it unfolds intelligibly the narrative of the secrets of the world and of man. Each time in a different way it creates the world anew, making it accessible to our reason, our senses, our emotions. (Milovan Djilas, 1990)

Learning to be a qualitative researcher parallels very closely the process of learning to draw. When I encounter street artists who do caricatures, I usually pause to observe how effortlessly and quickly the artist is sketching the portrait. For those of us lacking in these skills, there is an appreciation for the competency that is being displayed. Strokes are confident and sure, and the character of the subject emerges in an expected but magical way. Like driving, reading, riding a bicycle, or shaving, there is an unthinking ease that accompanies the careful execution of tasks that are subsumed in each of these activities. In a book about learning how to draw, Edwards (1999) talks about the ability to draw as a "whole" or "global skill." When we get good at "it"—whether it be driving or drawing—all of the component skills become integrated into the smooth and automatic flow of the global skill. The hallmark of a global skill is that once you have integrated the component skills, you have this capability for life. Hence, once we learn to ride a bicycle, we can jump on a bike at any time in our life and the skills

are there. With drawing, according to Edwards, once you have integrated the basic skills, you can draw, and you need not go on forever adding additional basic skills. Improving as an artist can involve the refinement of technique, but these are like small architectural details on the sound structure of the building.

Acquiring whole skills such as drawing or doing qualitative research comes with a number of pedagogical challenges. When I first learned to do qualitative research, the emphasis was placed on getting into the field as quickly as possible and then finding my way through readings and class discussions. At the time, I felt like I was being asked to drive on the freeway as a way to learn how to drive. It was anxiety provoking because I had neither the whole skill nor any of the component skills to feel competent or safe in this new endeavor. Pedagogically, it was sink or swim. Upon reflection, I did both. Two decades later, I feel that I have acquired the whole skill as the foundation for the qualitative work that I do. I don't remember when the whole skill came together, but I know it is there now. It wasn't a magical moment, but was rather like the sedimentation of many granular moments both in the field and in my office staring down piles of transcripts. I have pondered many times about how I came to have this in order to understand how to teach others the global skill of qualitative research. My conclusion is that it occurs on two levels. First, immersion in the field, on-site puzzle-solving, making mistakes, building confidence by doing, managing research relationships, overcoming anxieties and fears—are all part of the practice of qualitative research. It is the same as learning to parallel park—positioning, going up the curb, and eventually the easy glide into the space like a foot into a sock. There is no shortcut to bringing the component parts together—marinate they must. Second, I believe that there are a number of important component skills that we can learn as a basis for doing qualitative research well. When learning to draw, for example, the global skill of drawing is achieved only when students learn how to perceive edges, perceive spaces, perceive relationships, and perceive lights and shadows. These are learnable and teachable skills that all focus on perception, or, how to see. Like drawing, perceptual skills are at the root of learning how to be a good qualitative researcher.

### **Drawing Informs Research: The Cultivation of Perceptual Skills**

The world of art provides us with a number of tools for enhancing our perceptual skills as qualitative researchers. These individual skills become

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important elements in the development of our whole skill as qualitative researchers.

### Composition

Any photograph, painting, or sculpture begins with the process of composition. In the art world, the artist begins with a set of parameters determined by the format of the medium: the size of the canvas, the camera viewfinder, or the block out of which a sculpture is to be shaped. Within these parameters, the components of the subject matter must be placed. The artist distributes the shapes and spaces within the boundaries of the chosen medium. There are decisions about focus and emphasis, foregrounding and backgrounding, positive and negative spaces, and viewpoint. Using “L”-shaped fingers, the artist works through a series of critical decisions about the composition of the piece.

In qualitative research, we also begin with decisions about composition. When we set out to understand even the simplest phenomenon having to do with family relationships or human development, we are confronted with a complicated array of possibilities. Early on in my qualitative class, I send students on an assignment to observe families in public places. Using DeVault’s observational work about families at the zoo as a template, I ask students to observe families in places where they might naturally be—in the food court, at religious services, or in the park. In our class discussions, there are two themes that students typically bring back for discussion: the first has to do with their feelings about being intrusive and the second has to do with questions about composition. Public spaces are visually complicated spaces when we shift from being in those spaces for our own purpose to being observers of those spaces. Students who have gone to the food court at the mall talk about their uncertainties about where to sit to get the best view, whether to focus on one family in front of them or the three families that are around them. They are unsure about whom to observe—all members of the family at once or one person who is carrying out a role. They are unsure about what to observe—talk, gender activity, physical interactions, or discipline. The challenge in these busy settings is differentiating important sounds from the noise.

These kinds of uncertainties are common when we do qualitative research. The social worlds we are seeking to understand are complex and filled with too much detail. In the same way that we cannot depict 360° panoramas on a flat canvas, we must be selective in what we can frame in our social observations. Stephen, from Joyce’s novel, gives this direction for the artist:

In order to see that basket, said Stephen, your mind first of all separates the basket from the rest of the visible universe which is not the basket. The first phase of apprehension is a bounding line drawn about the object to be apprehended. An esthetic image is presented to us either in space or in time. What is audible is presented in time; what is visible is presented in space. But temporal or spatial, the esthetic image is first luminously apprehended as self-bounded (*sic*) and self-contained (*sic*) upon the immeasurable background of space or time which is not it. You apprehend it as one thing. You see it as one whole. You apprehend its wholeness. (p. 216)

In phenomenology, *bracketing* is a term used to bring attention to a particular aspect of our conscious awareness. In our research, it is always necessary for us to be selective in our subject matter and to bracket a manageable subset of reality for our inquiry. Allowing the edges of our format to be too broad, we risk losing ourselves in the complexity; too narrow and we lose important information about context. Making decisions about where we draw the edge for our compositions is often accompanied by an anxiety about what we have excluded. If I focus my gaze here, I will miss what happens over there, which may be more interesting or more revealing to me in my inquiry. This is unavoidable, but rather than allowing that anxiety to steal energy from our attention, it is important to commit to a composition that holds promise for our inquiry.

There are many ways that we construct the composition of our work when doing qualitative research. Articulating a clear research question, giving a rationale for the focus we have chosen, locating our inquiry in existing knowledge and literature, and formulating questions to be asked are ways that we as researchers begin to compose edges, spaces, and shadows in our work. In photography, “depth of field” describes choices about the range of focus. When we focus a camera on an object to take a picture, the underlying optical phenomenon is called the circle of least confusion. The object of focus is the circle of least confusion, whereas objects that are out of focus on the film plane become increasingly large “circles of confusion.” Depth of field is the term used to describe those circles of least confusion that appear to the human eye to be in focus. When we do qualitative research, finding the appropriate depth of field or range of focus is one of our first challenges. When faced with complex family realities and a wide range of compositional possibilities, we must compose the picture in order to locate on our film plane the circle of least confusion—a range of objects in focus that provides a basis for close scrutiny. Finding the appropriate depth of field is an important compositional strategy in qualitative research. In qualitative research, focus is often narrowed to understand the details of everyday living: how decisions are made, how relationships are managed, and how identities are constructed.

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When we compose our research, it is important to be mindful of how we allow our attention to be drawn to certain kinds of experiences. We are drawn to experiences that we find interesting or important. Equally, we are likely to shift our attention away from topics that appear boring or mundane. Yet there are times when a focus on the mundane aspects may offer more insight into family dynamics than the features that “stand out.” For example, in video analyses of family socialization practices, Kreppner (2005) talks about encountering the analytic barrier of “triviality”: “during our earliest discussions of what we had observed in the families, we found ourselves trapped by our focus on exceptional events and our neglect of those behaviors we believed were self-evident and not interesting enough” (p. 80). It wasn’t until they started focusing on the “trivial” that they began to see more fully the patterns of family interaction and communication.

Composition is a matter of selection that involves not only technical decisions about framing edges and spaces, but moral and aesthetic decisions that reflect values, interests, and preferences. In the Introduction to his book *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) argues that in our effort to understand the organization of everyday experience, we need to concern ourselves not so much with what it is that a camera takes pictures of, but rather with the camera itself. In other words, it is not the nature of reality itself that is important, but the conditions under which we perceive reality. These are matters of selective attention, focus, and engagement with the subject matter.

### Attending to the Subject Matter

One of the difficulties in learning to draw is that we bring a host of prior expectations to our subject matter. As a result, when we are asked to draw a picture of ourselves from memory, we usually produce a cartoon-like stick person with exaggerated ears and pokey hair. When we are asked to draw a picture of a farm scene without looking at one, we tend to produce a picture that reminds us of our Grade 3 efforts. Even when we are asked to reproduce a picture from an image, our drawings are confounded by prior frames of reference about how big heads should be or what hands look like. In order to understand how these prior frames of reference can actually interfere with our artistic abilities, one of the exercises that you can do is to draw a face from an upside down picture (Edwards, 1999). Remarkably, our reproductions are much more sophisticated. Instead of trying to reproduce a mouth, we are only trying to reproduce a series of lines and shadows. By drawing the face upside down, we are better able to get past our preconceived notions about what the face should look like. By making the

familiar image unfamiliar by turning it upside down, we can see it more clearly.

When we do qualitative research, one of our biggest challenges is to position ourselves in a way that allows us to get beyond what we expect to see. For example, when I first started researching the meaning of family time, my way of seeing was strongly influenced by the dominant and now familiar story. It goes something like this: Women moved into the paid labor force in unprecedented numbers; men continued to work full-time; patterns of consumption grew, accompanied by a pattern of overwork to sustain these consumer needs; levels of work—family conflict grew; “time famine” in families was the result. My inquiry was thereby shaped by this preoccupation with the need for family members to have more time with each other. Family time was the Holy Grail in the work—family literature. With two young children at home, I was feeling the time crunch in my own family. Accordingly, my goal was to try to understand how this was experienced and with what kinds of consequences. Throughout, my underlying orientation was to understand families as victimized in some way by these powerful forces. Along the way, several sources of information arose that made me sit up and pay more attention to what people were saying. The first of these was the release of Arlie Hochschild’s (1997) book *The Time Bind* where she reported that a significant number of women in her sample sought refuge from the work—family stress not at home having more family time, but by having time with calm and reasonable colleagues at work. The second piece of information that reminded me that I needed to pay more attention was the emerging finding from international time diary studies that parents were actually increasing the amount of time they were spending with their children over the previous decade, not decreasing. Both of these results run counter to the dominant story. As I tried to make sense of my data about family time, I had to reorient myself to a different attentiveness to the participants’ stories. One of the strongest themes to emerge in my own data was the degree to which children shaped and controlled the experience of family time. Although the dominant story focused on the problems of family time for parents, the descriptions that I was hearing were focused on this as a problem for children. Family time was in the service of children, often in response to the wishes of children and usually involving child centered activities (for more on this see Daly, 2001). In light of these discoveries, it made sense that parents were spending more time with their children, and it also made sense that they might wish to escape from under the weight of responsibilities of their children by spending more time at work.

In order to see clearly the stories that are being presented to us (as opposed to the stories we expect to hear), it is sometimes necessary to turn

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them upside down so that we might see the story lines more clearly. Learning that parents were spending more time with their children turned the dominant story on its head. With it upside down, the lines become more apparent and the path of discovery opens up.

### Representation

In both art and science, representation is the symbolic means by which we portray aspects of reality. Poets use verse, sculptors use marble or clay, and scientists use papers and monographs to communicate symbolically their interpretations of physical and social reality. Representation is the means by which we make sense of the world and communicate those understandings to our audiences.

In qualitative research, representation is ultimately a matter of verbalization of what we see. When we seek to represent reality to others, we must provide commentary on that which we are seeing. Although our first responsibility is to attend to the reality at hand in order to see it clearly, it must be followed by a description in words. We use words to articulate where our attention has been drawn. We use words to be selective in the aspects of reality that we can fully attend to. We verbalize what we see in order to construct a plausible explanation of what is going on.

Generating substantive theory or creating an ethnographic account is a verbalization of what we see. It is a commentary designed to communicate with our audiences the way we have seen reality. Representation in art can take many forms. There are those who strive for accuracy and seek to provide detailed and realistic images of reality; those who wish to provide impressionistic portrayals of reality through the use of color, mood, and light; and those who portray what they have seen through abstract representations of reality. Similarly, in qualitative research there are those who strive to be true to the reality at hand and offer precise ethnographic accounts; those who are deliberate about offering interpretative accounts of that reality by offering their own impressions and responses to the reality they have seen; and those who through their creative commentaries of reality seek to provoke, challenge, and arouse in a more abstract way. The forms of representation are many, and we will examine these in more detail in Chapter 2 where we discuss the ways that different paradigm assumptions influence the forms of representation.

It was Lord Alfred Korzybski, one of the originators of the discipline of General Semantics, who first warned about the dangers of confusing the map and the territory. When we do provide representation as artists or social scientists, we are cartographers who seek to provide guides to reality.



Even when our aim is to represent that reality as accurately as possible, we are still offering symbolic constructions of that reality. Our explanations are second-order stories—our created stories of the stories that we see and hear—once removed from the lived experience of our participants.

Learning to see and being successful in communicating what we see are foundational skills for both artists and social scientists. While we may have gifts in our personal abilities, our success is more likely contingent on our effort to cultivate these skills over time. Furthermore, perception and seeing are never “neutral” acts that result in some kind of straightforward representation. Rather, seeing and perception are always shaped by past experience, current values and beliefs, and future goals and expectations. In this regard, it is important, too, to recognize that both art and science are not activities that occur only within the individual, but rather are shaped by cultural preferences, priorities, and meanings.

In the next chapter, I turn attention to the importance of our beliefs about the acquisition of knowledge as the basis for moving forward with our research inquiry. Beliefs about what constitutes “good art” or beliefs about the “right way” to do science are embedded in cultural values and community practices. Although there is no one right way to do qualitative research, it is important to pay attention to the broader context of values and practices that can shape the way we design our research studies.

Science, like art, takes many forms, and in thinking about qualitative research as a scientific endeavor, it is important to begin with the diversity of science. These are uncertain times for science! Where once we may have thought of science as having only one form that included theoretical propositions, hypothesis testing, and the rigorous gathering of evidence, it now takes a variety of forms that are shaped by a variety of beliefs and practices. Epistemology is at the root of these different scientific practices and it is to this concern that attention now turns.

