Qualitative research designs tend to work with a relatively small number of cases. Generally speaking, qualitative researchers are prepared to sacrifice scope for detail. Moreover, even what counts as detail tends to vary between qualitative and quantitative researchers. The latter typically seek detail in certain aspects of correlations between variables. By contrast, for qualitative researchers, detail is found in the precise particulars of such matters as people’s understandings and interactions. This is because qualitative researchers tend to use a nonpositivist model of reality.

To underline the intellectual diversity of the field, in the next section we offer a brief summary of Gubrium and Holstein’s analysis of four models of qualitative research.

THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A thorough discussion of differences in method and theory among qualitative researchers is found in Gubrium and Holstein’s *The New Language of Qualitative Method* (1997). This book classifies qualitative research in terms of various orientations on the empirical data under analysis. In particular, Gubrium and Holstein focus on how each qualitative approach uses a particular analytical language to emphasize a particular facet of social reality. As the authors put it,

Our strategy for understanding the diversity of qualitative research is to treat each variant as an enterprise that develops, and is conducted in, a language or idiom of its own. Accordingly, each idiom represents a distinctive reality, virtually constituting its empirical horizon. (p. 5)

At the heart of this classification system is the division between substance and process, or between what is being studied and how it is constructed. Take the topic of nudity, for example. A qualitative researcher might ask the following: What are the deviant traits that characterize nudists and what practices are associated with a nudist? Another researcher studying the same topic could examine how nudity could be made normal or routine. In “The Nudist Management of Respectability,” Martin Weinberg (1994) explores how nudist colonies achieve the “respectability” of the unclothed body through a set of locally defined and enforced norms like “no body contact” and “no accentuation of the body” (e.g., sitting with one’s legs open). Weinberg’s goal is to answer the question, “How can they see their behavior as morally appropriate?” (p. 392).

With this distinction between how (process of constructing reality) and what (reality as substantive truth), let us now look at the four models of qualitative research discussed in Gubrium and Holstein’s book (i.e., naturalism, emotionalism, ethnomethodology, and postmodernism).
Naturalism

As a model of qualitative research, naturalism focuses on the factual characteristics of the object under study. Gubrium and Holstein cite William Whyte’s *Street Corner Society* as a classic example of naturalism. In this urban ethnography from the 1940s, Whyte’s goal is to describe what life is really like in an inner-city Italian neighborhood located in Boston. The observations and analysis are intended to objectively reflect what Whyte saw and heard in this real world of poverty. Naturalism’s strength is its representational simplicity. A naturalistic ethnography is almost formulaically built around the following tasks: entering the setting, establishing rapport, recording observations with an eye toward sociological concepts (social status and group dynamics), and presenting the findings. The major shortcoming of this approach, according to Gubrium and Holstein, is this:

Because they view the border [between the topic of study and the way in which it is socially constructed] as a mere technical hurdle that can be overcome through methodological skill and rigor, they lose sight of the border as a region where reality is constituted within representation. (1997, p. 106)

This criticism suggests that naturalists overlook how people create meaning in their lives. Respondents are treated as mere sources of data without any interpretive capacity of their own. In a naturalistic framework, the participants’ “interpretive practice” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997), or how they make sense of their own world, is irrelevant.

Emotionalism

Like naturalism, emotionalism takes for granted the reality of the topic under study. The difference between the two is that where naturalism searches for objective reality in physical places, emotionalism locates the real in the emotional life of the researcher and the respondents, or as Gubrium and Holstein put it, an emotionalist “virtually takes naturalism to heart” (1997, p. 59). Emotionalists are especially concerned with authenticity, which for our purposes can be defined as “deeper truths about the self.” For emotionalists, alternative writing techniques can be used in qualitative research to better represent “true feelings.” In the following extract, for example, Laurel Richardson describes why she chose poetry to represent her interview data:

Writing poetry is emotionally preoccupying; it opens up unexpected, shadow places in my self. As a kind of time-saving/snaring-two-birds-with-one-net
strategy I decided to fashion material from an unmarried mother interview into a poem. (1992, p. 131)

For Richardson, transforming interview data into poetry enables the researcher to preserve the authenticity and breadth of her respondent's story—information that she feels would otherwise be lost in a traditional style of writing and analysis. As she puts it, “For sociological readers, the poem may seem to omit ‘data’ that they want to know. But this is Louisa May’s [her interview respondent’s] story not the sociologist’s” (p. 126).

The problem with emotionalism, as Gubrium and Holstein note, is that “by peering so intently into subject’s interior lives and inner realms, emotionalists can blind themselves to the ways that subjects shape these spheres by way of their own interpretive actions” (1997, p. 108). Under emotionalists’ exclusive focus on inner feelings and self-reflective confessions, all substantive inquiries about social reality dissolve into self-explorative texts.

**Ethnomethodology**

The third qualitative approach reviewed by Gubrium and Holstein is *ethnomethodology*, which could roughly be translated into the study of people’s methods of constructing reality in everyday life. Unlike the other two approaches, ethnomethodology is very much concerned with *how* social reality is constructed in everyday interaction. Ethnomethodologists’ primary aim is to understand how people go about doing things in their everyday lives by creating meaningful categories for themselves and others. Thus, for example, an ethnomethodologist might ask seemingly curious questions like: What does it mean to be a “man”? The researcher would then *bracket* any prior knowledge about the topic (i.e., keep preconceived understandings from entering the analysis). In essence, bracketing means ontological detachment from the topic. Therefore, in representing the analysis, the word *man*, for example, would be placed in quotation marks to indicate its bracketed usage for the purpose of the study.

Harold Garfinkel, one of the founders of ethnomethodology, offers numerous examples of this qualitative approach in *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Some of the studies cited in this book are labeled “breaching experiments,” or small research projects deliberately designed to violate taken-for-granted social order in order to reveal the process of its construction. In one such study, college students were asked to “engage an acquaintance or a friend in an ordinary conversation and, without indicating that what the experimenter was asking was in any way unusual, to insist that the person clarify the sense of his commonplace remarks” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 42). The goal of the study was to reveal
“seen but unnoticed” (p. 42) norms used in everyday conversations. Here is an extract from the study (S = subject, E = experimenter):

The victim waved his hand cheerily.

S: How are you?

E: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finances, my school work, my peace of mind, my...?

S: [Red in the face and suddenly out of control.] Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don’t give a damn how you are. (p. 44)

In this case, by problematizing conversational norms, the experimenter reveals how the question “How are you?” is used to achieve “politeness” in everyday encounters.

For Gubrium and Holstein, although analytically powerful, the problem with ethnomethodology is that it risks losing sight of the topic of analysis in the name of focusing on the process of its creation. As they put it, “As the substantively meaningful aspects of local culture are shunted aside in order to concentrate on constitutive interactional activity, the content of lived experience becomes almost incidental” (1997, p. 107).

While ethnomethodology’s analytical rigor can free us of trite or stereotypic understandings of a research problem, it does, on the other hand, impose restrictions on substantive interests. For example, one cannot study poverty ethnomethodologically without bracketing its meaning, or placing it in quotation marks (i.e., “poverty”). In this way, poverty loses its significance as a global social problem and becomes a particular achievement at a particular place and time. As a whole, a strict ethnomethodological analysis trades the substance of everyday life for a rigorous understanding of the activities that define it.

Postmodernism

Although postmodernism refers to a vast body of literature, for the sake of simplicity and flow of discussion, let us assume the term encapsulates an analytical orientation that questions all the achievements of modernity (e.g., humanism, rationality, reason, science, and so on). One of the key contributions of postmodernism to qualitative analysis is its critique of the representational authority of the written text. In particular, postmodernists ask, Who owns the knowledge embedded in the text and what power or authority supports it?

Gubrium and Holstein assert that the common theme of postmodernism is how and through what cultural forces we come to understand and accept
certain representations of reality as being “true,” “legitimate,” or “acceptable.” Whereas ethnomethodologists study the processes through which members construct their reality, postmodernists question the power relations and the political rhetoric embedded in the representations and constructions of social reality. While some postmodernists call for experimenting with alternative modes of representing social reality, others fundamentally question all forms of representation to the point of nihilism by arguing that nothing can be known as “true” or “good” (for a discussion of the different branches of postmodernism, see Pauline Rosenau, 1992). Gubrium and Holstein’s critique of postmodernism is best illustrated by these ominous words:

Postmodernism in the guise of qualitative inquiry is very risky business. Rhetorical ubiquity notwithstanding, at the lived border, reality is always on the verge of collapsing into representation, taking with it the substantively distinct parameters of experience whose “qualities” are qualitative method’s unique subject matter. Trying to capture that which is not there, or to describe the inexpressible, using mere rhetoric that begs its own deconstruction, is hazardous indeed. Qualitative inquiry is surely in peril as it gambles with empirical nihilism. (1997, p. 109)

Thus, while raising very important questions about the content of social reality and the methods of its production, in its extreme forms, postmodernism threatens the very need for scientific investigation and analysis. If, according to some postmodernists, we cannot and should not separate fact from fiction or truth from falsehood, then there is no point in spending precious resources to empirically study and analyze social reality—we could just as well write poems or a novel about our experiences. Nonetheless, it is possible to learn from the important insights of postmodernism without drowning in its whirlpool of intellectual nihilism. The most important of these insights is an emphasis on the rhetorical and constructive aspects of knowledge. That is, the realization that facts (social science facts included) are socially constructed to serve the interests of a particular group. In fact, this limited interpretation of the postmodern project is consistent with our own position in this book about qualitative research being a pragmatic enterprise that serves different interests.

It is worth noting that although these four models differ in how they emphasize the nature of social reality, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, the emotionalists and the postmodernists share a common concern with exploring alternative representational strategies. David discusses the emotionalist position further in Silverman, 2004, and the nature and purpose of models is examined in greater depth in Chapter 7. For the moment, we just want to leave you with the thought that qualitative research can mean many different things.
By now, this whole debate may have left you thoroughly confused. As a beginning researcher, you may rightly feel that the last thing you need is to sink into an intractable debate between warring camps. However, it helps if we treat this less as a war and more as a clarion call to be clear about the issues that animate our work and help define our research problem. As we argue in Chapter 6, purely theoretical debates are often less than helpful if we want to carry out effective research. The point is to select a model that makes sense to you (and, of course, there are more than the two models relevant to qualitative research—see Chapter 7). The strengths and weaknesses of any model will only be revealed in what you can do with it.

We will, therefore, conclude this chapter with a single case study that we believe is an inspiring example and that shows the value of using a clear-cut model and, thereby, demonstrates the particular explanatory power of qualitative research.

**CASE STUDY: “POSITIVE THINKING”**

Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (2000) (henceforth WK) were interested in the way in which both laypeople and many medical staff assume that “positive thinking” helps you cope better with cancer. They point out that most of the evidence for this belief derives from questionnaires in which people tick a box or circle a number.

What alternative can we offer to this kind of quantitative research? The preferred qualitative route has been to analyze what people with cancer say in open-ended interviews. Deriving from what is referred to as the emotionalist model, such research has generally sought out patients’ meanings and emotions and, as WK point out, has broadly supported the findings of quantitative studies.

However, there is a problem here, namely: “There is a widespread assumption in [both] these literatures that research participants are naïve subjects,