

Exploration—How Did Schools Avert a Shooting Rampage?

Exploratory research seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. The goal is to answer the question “What is going on here?” and to investigate social phenomena without expectations. This purpose is associated with the use of methods that capture large amounts of relatively unstructured information. For example, researchers investigating the emergence of youth gangs in the 1980s were encountering a phenomenon of which they had no direct experience. Thus, an early goal was to find out what it was like to be a gang member and how gang members made sense of their situation.

Research that is exploratory in nature is generally concerned with uncovering detailed information about a given phenomenon, learning as much as possible about particular people and/or events. While there have been far too many school shootings in the United States during the past decade, there have also been numerous incidents in which students were plotting to kill their peers or faculty members but came to the attention of authorities before their plans could be carried out. To examine how these incidents were stopped, Eric Madfis (2014) selected 11 schools where a mass shooting had been diverted between 2000 and 2009 and conducted intensive interviews with people who were involved, including 11 principals and 21 other administrators, teachers, and police officers. He also corroborated the interview data with newspaper reports and, where possible, court transcripts and police incident reports.

Madfis’s (2014) research was truly exploratory. You will learn much more about qualitative research in Chapter 8, but for now, we simply want to highlight how this study is different from the other research types listed above. He let the people he interviewed speak for themselves; he didn’t come with questions that were designed to measure concepts such as violence or delinquency before the interviews. After examining all of the interview transcripts, Madfis developed themes that emerged among them all. This is what made the research exploratory instead of explanatory.

Five out of the 11 school shootings were thwarted by other students who were not directly involved with or entrusted by the accused students but who came about the information indirectly. For example, one student reported the existence of disturbing postings and images on another student’s network website. The second most common category of intervention involved people who had been told directly by students accused of plotting the attacks. For example, after one student was sent threatening messages, she told her mother, who then called the police. When the accused student was questioned, he confessed and weapons were discovered in his bedroom.

School administrators believed that students have been more likely to come forward with information about their peers since the Columbine High School shootings than they had been before this catalyzing mass shooting. One school principal stated, “Columbine absolutely made kids much more vigilant about things going on around them. . . . I think it made kids less afraid to speak up if something wasn’t sitting right with them” (Madfis, 2014, p. 235). Another theme that was clear from the interviews was that if school environments were going to break the “student code of silence,” they must be supporting, cohesive, and trusting. For example, another principal stated, “The best mechanism we have as a deterrent for these sorts of violent acts is good relationships between kids and adults, because kids will tell you” (Madfis, 2014, p. 235).

As you can see from this discussion of Madfis’s results, the goal of his research was to explore the factors related to instances in which a school shooting had been successfully thwarted. He did not go into the school with a survey filled with questions because little is known about these factors in the existing literature. As such, the investigation was explorative in nature. It is different from descriptive, because prevalence estimate of some phenomenon are not the goal. Rather, a deeper understanding of the processes and perceptions of study participants is the desired outcome in exploratory research.

Exploratory research Research in which social phenomena are investigated without a priori expectations to develop explanations of them