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Why *Readme First*?

Why *Readme First*? Why should a researcher, new to qualitative inquiry, begin by reading a book on the range of ways of doing qualitative analysis? Why not just start by collecting the data and worry later about what to do with them?

The answer is simple. In qualitative research, collecting data is not a process separate from analyzing data. The strength of qualitative inquiry is in the integration of the research question, the data, and data analysis. There are many ways of gathering and managing data, but because qualitative research is always about discovery, there is no rigid sequence of data collection and analysis. If you collect data and later select a method for analyzing them, you may find that the method you have chosen needs different data. To start with a *method* and impose it on a research question can be equally unhelpful. Good qualitative research is consistent; the question goes with the method, which fits appropriate data collection, appropriate data handling, and appropriate analysis techniques.

The challenge for the novice researcher is to find the way to an appropriate method. A researcher new to qualitative inquiry who evaluates the possible paths well and makes good choices can achieve a congruence of research question, research data, and processes of analysis that will strengthen and drive the project. However, this may seem an impossible challenge. The process of qualitative inquiry all too often appears as a mystery to the new researcher, and the choice of an appropriate method of analysis is obscured. The embattled researcher too often resorts to collecting large amounts of very challenging data in the hope that what to do with them will later become apparent. Some researchers end projects that way, still wondering why they were doing this or what to do with all the data they collected.

Readme First is an invitation to those who have a reason for handling qualitative data. We see qualitative research as a wide range of ways to

explore and understand data that would be wasted and their meaning lost if they were preemptively reduced to numbers. All qualitative methods seek to discover understanding or to achieve explanation *from* the data instead of from (or in addition to) prior knowledge or theory. Thus, the goals always include learning from, and doing justice to, complex data. In order to achieve such understanding, the researcher needs ways of exploring complexity.

Qualitative data come from many sources (e.g., documents, interviews, field notes, and observations) and in many forms (e.g., text, photographs, audio and video recordings, and films). Researchers may analyze these data using very many, very different methods. But each method has integrity, and all methods have the common goal of making sense of complexity, making new understandings and theories about the data, and constructing and testing answers to the research question. This book is an invitation to new qualitative researchers to see many methods—to see them as wholes and as understandable unities. This makes the choice of method necessary but also makes the process of choosing enabling rather than alarming.

In this book we use the term *method* to mean a collection of research strategies and techniques based on theoretical assumptions that combine to form a particular approach to data and mode of analysis.

This book provides the beginning researcher with an overview of techniques for making data and an explanation of the ways different tools fit different purposes and provide different research experiences and outcomes. Our goal is not to present a supermarket of techniques from which the researcher can pick and choose arbitrarily; rather, we aim to draw a map that shows clearly how some methodological choices lead more directly than others to particular goals. We see all qualitative methods as integrated and good qualitative research as purposive. Until the researcher has an idea of the research goal, sees from the beginning the entire research process, knows the contents of the appropriate analytic toolbox, and recognizes from the start of the project what may be possible at the finish, it is not advisable to begin.

This book is not intended to be a sufficient and complete sourcebook but, rather, a guide to what it would be like to do a project. Indeed, it is intended to be read before a researcher begins a project. The book is about how ways of collecting and making data are connected to ways of

handling data skillfully, and how qualitative methods allow researchers to understand, explain, discover, and explore. Our intention is to inform readers of the research possibilities, direct them to the appropriate literature, and help them on their way to trying out techniques and exploring the processes of analysis. By informing themselves about the possibilities for analysis and the range of methods available, new researchers can critically select the methods appropriate to their purposes.

We wrote this book because as researchers, teachers, mentors, and advisers, we have suffered from a vast gap in the qualitative research literature. Most texts describe a single method, often not explaining how purpose, data, and analytic technique fit together. A few display the range of qualitative methods, but a novice researcher is seldom helped by such displays if they include no explanation of how and why choices can be made. The confusion is worsened if the researcher is led to believe that one method is required for reasons of fashion, ideology, alleged superiority, or pragmatic necessity (for example, when only this one method can be supervised or approved in the research site). A researcher may be caught between instructions for a particular method and research reports that offer no sense of how those who did the research got there. In this volume, we offer to bridge at least some of these gaps. In Part I, we discuss the very wide range of methods and how to select among them. Then Part II takes the reader inside a project, showing what it would be like to construct and conduct a project.

The present literature rarely helps readers envision, at the beginning, the completion of a project. Researchers approaching qualitative inquiry need to be able to see the end before they start. In the chapters in Part III, we advise the reader on the goals to aim for, on rigor and reliability, and on the processes of finishing and writing it up. In the final two chapters, we deal with getting the reader started on his or her own project and smoothing the challenges of the startup.

Readme First is neither a substitute for experience nor an instruction manual for any particular method. Researchers who want to use the techniques we describe here on their own data are directed to methodological literature that offers fuller instruction in particular methods. Nor do we intend this book to be a substitute for the new researcher's learning how to think qualitatively alongside an experienced mentor. We are both sure that qualitative research, like any other craft, is best learned this way. But many researchers do not have the opportunity to work with mentors, and sometimes the learning experience can be confining even while it is instructive. In this book, we present some practical ways new researchers can try out various techniques so they may develop their skills. Exploiting these practical examples will give researchers insights into why they

should use certain procedures and build their confidence to try them. Our goals are to demystify analysis, to promote informed choice, and to assist researchers in test-driving techniques while avoiding generalizing across methods or smudging the differences.

GOALS

In the development of this volume, we identified five related goals:

1. To emphasize the integrity of qualitative methods
2. To present methodological diversity as requiring informed choice
3. To demystify qualitative methods
4. To introduce qualitative research as a craft and to provide researchers with information on ways in which they can gain experience before launching their projects
5. To present qualitative methods as challenging and demanding

METHODS AND THEIR INTEGRITY

A strong message in this book is that although there is no one (or one best) approach to handling and analyzing qualitative data, good research is purposive and good methods are congruent with a fit among question, method, data, and analytic strategy. There are common strategies and techniques across all methods. It is these commonalities that make it sensible to talk about “qualitative methods.” But techniques and strategies make methodological sense only in the context of particular methods, and the method is what molds how the strategies and techniques are used. Therefore, although informed and debated innovation strengthens and changes methods, researchers do not gain by picking and choosing among techniques and incorporating them out of their methodological context.

Qualitative research helps us make sense of the world in a particular way. Making sense involves organizing the undisciplined confusion of events and the experiences of those who participate in those events as they occur in natural settings. Qualitative methods provide us with a

certain type of knowledge and with the tools to resolve confusions. Behind the selection of method is often, but not always, an explicit or implicit theoretical framework that carries assumptions about social “reality” and how it can be understood. Various qualitative methods offer different prisms through which to view the world, different perspectives on reality, and different ways in which to organize chaos. Further, they use different aspects of reality as data, and the combination of these different data, different perspectives, and different modes of handling the data give us different interpretations of reality.

Because the method the researcher uses influences the form the results will take, the researcher must be familiar with different kinds of qualitative methods, their assumptions, and the ways they are conducted before beginning a qualitative project. Such preparation will ensure that the researcher’s goals are achieved, that the assumptions of the research have not been violated, and that the research is solid.

To argue for *methodological integrity* is not to argue for rigidity in methods. Methods rarely stay unchanged, and it is essential that they evolve over time. Researchers develop new techniques when confronted by challenges in their data, and if these techniques are consistent with the methods, they are drawn into other researchers’ strategies. We both find excitement in methodological change and debate and have both been actively involved in it. However, we argue that innovations must be evaluated and critiqued within a method and developed with caution by seasoned researchers. Researchers who approach analysis by mixing and matching techniques derived from different methods without understanding them in their context commonly end up with a bag of techniques unlinked by strategies and uninformed by method, techniques that have nothing in common except that they are in the same project bag. Specifically, we want to warn researchers against using all the tools that particular computer programs provide without asking whether these techniques fit the research question, the research method, and the data.

METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND INFORMED CHOICE

Our second goal is to display the diversity of qualitative methods and, in so doing, help the new researcher in choosing a method. As we noted above, the literature is dominated by texts that teach one particular way

of doing qualitative research. Those texts are essential in that they provide the detail researchers need to work with particular methods, but in our experience, newcomers need an overview of the range of methods to help them envision the possibilities and outcomes of using alternative methods. Just as automobile manuals tell you little about the processes of driving, the menus in a software package do not tell you how to *analyze data* or how to use the software with different qualitative methods.

We begin with the assumption that no one method is intrinsically superior to others; each method serves a different purpose. For any given project or purpose, there may well be no method that is obviously best suited. However, the researcher needs to identify which method is *most* appropriate and then go to the relevant texts—hence, the title of this book. This volume is intended not as a substitute for the texts on particular methods but, rather, as a tool to help researchers access those texts. Like the README files that come with computer applications, it is intended to be read before the researcher commences the research process. We hope that researchers will be led from this book to particular methods and that what they learn here will help them make informed choices concerning what they do during the research process.

We start with a sketch map of a few qualitative methods. This particular methodological map may puzzle those familiar with the qualitative literature because it deliberately ignores disciplinary boundaries. We strongly believe that the development of qualitative methods has been hindered by narrow debates and the inability of many researchers to learn from, or even read about, the methods used in other disciplines. For instance, although ethnography was developed within anthropology (and often best answers questions asked by anthropologists), researchers from other disciplines (e.g., education) often ask ethnographic types of questions and are thus best served by ethnographic method. But research methods have been subject to waves of fashion so that, for instance, in health sciences, the relevance of ethnography is often ignored in favor of other methods that may be less suited to particular projects, such as grounded theory or phenomenology. Disciplines do not “own” methods, and researchers are deprived of resources if they are prevented from looking beyond the current trends in their own disciplines.

Our methodological map is designed only for orientation; it is not complete, and it gives relatively little detail. We do not attempt to map all forms of qualitative inquiry; rather, we want to distinguish major methods in order to show and encourage methodological diversity, integrity, versatility, and respect for the many ways of making sense of data and making theory from data.

NO MYSTERIES!

Our third goal is to demystify qualitative methods. Each method provides a cluster of approaches or techniques to use with data—techniques requiring plenty of skill but no magic. New researchers who are awed by the great mysteries of analysis are inhibited from trying their hands at making sense of data, even when they urgently wish to do so.

Demystifying is always dangerous, as it risks trivializing. Good qualitative research certainly summons—and deserves—amazement, awe, and excitement for the complex processes involved in constructing new understandings and arriving at explanations that fit. We do not intend our discussion in this book to remove that excitement. But we see qualitative research as a craft, not a mystery, and as cognitive work, not miraculous and instantaneous insight. The processes of good qualitative analysis are exciting—not because they are mysterious, disguised by the wave of the magician’s wand, but because, like the work of the sculptor, they are the result of skilled use of simple tools, practiced techniques, focus and insight, concentrated work, and a lot of hard thinking.

This book, then, is about agency. Researchers make data and work with data as they attempt to derive from them accounts and theories that satisfy. We offer no “black box” from which theory “emerges.” To do justice to qualitative analysis, researchers have to be able to see how messy data can be transformed into elegant understanding and that this is something normal folk can attain. In this, they will be helped by practical accounts of how it has been done and hindered by passive-voice accounts of how themes are “discovered” and assertions that a theory “emerged.” We believe good qualitative research requires not only that researchers be actively involved in data making and interpreting but that they account for and describe their progressive understanding of their data and the processes of completion. This is an active and intentional process, one that researchers control, develop, shape, and eventually polish. It is, therefore, enormously exciting and rewarding.

LEARNING BY DOING IT: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS A CRAFT

Like any craft, qualitative research is best learned by doing it and talking about the experience. We have learned that teaching qualitative methods in abstraction, without involvement in data, works for very few students.

Yet most introductory texts offer rules rather than experiences. Our fourth goal is to offer learning by doing. In this book, we offer few rules; instead, we offer many explanations of techniques and the way they fit methods, as well as suggestions for test-driving the techniques discussed.

Of course, we cannot attempt to teach all the aspects of the major craft of qualitative analysis, with its long history and rapidly changing techniques, in this small volume. Our goal is to give a sense of what competent qualitative craftsmanship can do to data. Therefore, this book is not a “dummy’s guide”; we do not provide abbreviated instructions that result in trivial projects. We do not spoon-feed readers, and we do not give instructions regarding sequential steps they should take. Rather, we offer readers ways of exploring the aims and effects of the central qualitative techniques and of getting a sense of what these techniques do to data in the context of particular methods.

To see qualitative research as a craft is to resist trends toward qualitative inquiry that stops at description, merely reporting selected quotations. Whilst all projects describe what the researcher discovers, the craft of analysis is grounded in a theoretical context. Qualitative research is an intellectual activity firmly based on the cumulative intellectual activities of those who have come before and their respective disciplines. In Part I, we discuss the different emphases of different methods on description and analysis. Our aim is not only to assist researchers in trying out techniques but to help them see those techniques as making sense in the context of a given method with a theoretical framework, a history, and a literature.

We tackle this goal with attention to the software tools currently available for handling qualitative data. These are changing rapidly, and we share a concern that technological advances should not further obscure or replace the craft of analysis. Whether researchers handle their data using index cards or sophisticated software, the essential first step is to learn to think qualitatively. When data handling is done with software, the researcher must understand that software does not provide a method.

Selection of *some* tools for doing analysis requires an understanding of how analysis might be done with *other* tools. It is now common for researchers to use specialized software tools for at least some qualitative research processes, but the qualitative methods literature has handled the discussion of computer techniques poorly, if at all. Computer programs may come to dominate the ways researchers handle data and probably have contributed to the explosion of qualitative research. Yet novice researchers often see such programs as offering a method. For that reason, this book will look at what qualitative researchers can and cannot do with computers.

An overview of what software does is provided in Chapter 4, to assist you in choosing the appropriate software tools for your project. Four tables summarize what all programs do, then the variety available and when this will matter. They are designed to help the researcher see software choice, like methods choice, in terms of the requirement for methodological congruence.

Each of the chapters about techniques of handling data (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7) and writing up your study (Chapter 11) concludes with a summary of what you can expect from your software and advice and warnings to help you use it well. Qualitative software tools are developing rapidly, and the software in turn changes methods, since it allows researchers to handle data and ideas in ways not feasible without computers. So these chapter sections do not describe the range of current software. Any printed account of particular functions of available software would be immediately out of date. To learn about the range of qualitative software available to you, and the functions and tools that different software packages offer, you must turn to websites. This is easily done via the University of Surrey's CAQDAS Networking Project, whose website (<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/sociology/research/researchcentres/caqdas/>) provides up-to-date summaries of current software and links to the websites of all qualitative software developers.

The sections on software in this book offer something different. Rather than comparing current software functionality, they explore the ways qualitative work can be supported and inevitably changed by use of software tools—and how these can challenge or even obstruct research efforts. Our new companion website develops these themes and offers links to resources and tutorials in current packages and to further material. For more on these questions, see Richards's (2009) companion book, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, and the web resources at www.sagepub.co.uk/richards.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS A CHALLENGE

Our fifth goal concerns the public relations of various qualitative methods. We confront the widespread assumption that qualitative research is simple and that to “do qualitative” is easier than conducting quantitative research because you do not need statistics and computers. It never was simple or easy, and now, like any research activity, it requires computers. With the assumption that these are “soft methods for soft data,” we

present qualitative methods as challenging and demanding, made so because they can (and must) be rigorous and can (and should) lead to claims for defensible and useful conclusions.

The challenge is not in doing it “one right way” but in achieving coherent, robust results that enhance understanding. We present our readers with principles rather than hard-and-fast rules to be followed. We conclude the book by addressing the issues of rigor and the ways in which it is achieved, assessed, and demonstrated.

There is also a challenge in reconciling the sometimes opposing requirements of different methods. We emphasize, rather than obscure, what we consider to be the essential paradoxes inherent in qualitative research. Central among these paradoxes are the opposing requirements of simultaneous pursuit of complexity and production of clarity.

We explore and discuss the built-in contradictions that texts often submerge, dodge, or totally ignore. It is our experience that novice researchers find sometimes insurmountable barriers in unexplained paradoxes. Too often, they are left puzzled and paralyzed, feeling responsible for their inability to progress toward analysis. If understood as an integral part of analysis, however, these are challenges, not barriers. Meeting these challenges is a normal and necessary part of coping with complex data. Confronted, they offer hurdles that can and must be cleared, and all qualitative researchers know the pleasure of clearing such methodological obstacles. Once a researcher has acquired the proper tools, these obstacles become exciting challenges rather than reasons for giving up.

USING README FIRST

Warning: This book is designed to be read like a novel—it has a story. If you skip a section, later parts may not make sense; our best advice is that you skim read before you jump in fully.

Terminology

We use specific terms in specific ways. When we use the term *method*, we refer to a more-or-less consistent and coherent way of thinking about and making data, interpreting and analyzing data, and judging the resulting theoretical outcome. Methodological principles link the strategies together. These methods are clearly labeled and have their own literatures. We have

chosen five methods to sketch and compare throughout this book: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and case study. Many others will appear in the discussions as we show how methods vary in their emphases and completeness. A great amount of qualitative research is done without traditional methods. We share a concern that researchers feel coerced to stick a traditional label on less complete methods.

A research *strategy* is a way of approaching data with a combination of techniques that are ideally consistent with the method the researcher has chosen to use. Strategies, therefore, are based on, and consistent with, the assumptions and procedures linked in each particular method. We will argue that strategies made up of techniques that have been haphazardly and arbitrarily selected from different methods are problematic.

We also use the term *technique* to refer to a way of doing something. In our context, research techniques are ways of attempting or completing research tasks. If you see someone using a particular technique (e.g., coding data), that technique might not tell you which method the researcher is using—everyone codes data. But if you look more closely at the ways in which the researcher is applying that technique and at where it takes the researcher, you will be able to determine the method the researcher is using. Coding does different things to data when it is done by researchers using different methods.

We aim to map commonalities while explaining diversity and to present methodological techniques in ways that will help researchers arrive at coherent strategies within understood methods. Our overall goal is to help readers develop a sense of methodological purpose and appropriateness, and, at the same time, provide an evaluation and critique of qualitative research. We hope this book will help those readers who go on to do their own research to know what they are trying to do and why they are doing it one way rather than another. We want to help our readers achieve the most satisfying answers to their research questions, the strongest sense of discovery and arrival, and the best new understanding with the most efficiency and expediency.

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

We begin by establishing the integrity of methods and then approach, in turn, the different dimensions of qualitative research that researchers have to understand in order to be able to start their own research projects. In each section, we aim to give an idea of how it would be to work in a specific way.

At the end of each chapter for which software skills are relevant, we discuss how it will feel to work with software, and we advise on the use of computer tools. Each chapter concludes with a list of resources to direct readers to the literature on each of the methods discussed, to wider literature, and to completed examples of relevant research. This literature deals with the processes of thinking qualitatively, preparing for a project, relating to data, and creating and exploring ideas from the data and theories about the data.

The chapters in Part I, “Thinking Research,” address our first two goals: to establish the integrity of qualitative methods and to present methodological diversity as a choice, not a confusing maze. They provide a view from above, to be used as one would use an aerial photograph to scan a particular terrain and understand possible routes to a given destination.

In Chapter 2, which deals with the integrity of qualitative research, we set out what we see as core principles—the *purposiveness* of method and the methodological *congruence* of qualitative research. We show how different methods fit different sorts of qualitative data and how they have different implications for analysis. This very general overview informs the discussion in later chapters about the range of ways of meeting and handling data and the range of analysis processes and outcomes.

We compare five methods in Chapter 3 as we present the case for methodological congruence, showing how the question, data, and analysis fit together in each of the five methods introduced. These are all widely used: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and case study method. Although there are many variants within each method, each is identified by characteristic ways of addressing questions through data. Each method is appropriate to particular types of questions, each directs researchers to make particular research designs and data, and each leads researchers to use particular techniques for handling data and discovering and analyzing meanings.

Chapter 4 is about research design, and it has a simple message: A researcher absolutely needs a research design. We discuss why design is often demoted or ignored in qualitative research and urge that researchers take the opposite approach. Like the methods they express, research designs should not be seen as fixed or holy. However, careful consideration and planning set a project on the path to its intended goals and maximize the likelihood of getting there. We explore what researchers can and cannot plan, and we emphasize the design of the *scope* of the

project and the *appropriateness* of the data. At the end of the chapter, we discuss designs that combine more than one method and the risks and benefits of these.

The chapters in Part II, “Inside Your Project,” are concerned with what doing qualitative research is like. Chapter 5 is about data: the range of ways of making data, the role of the data at the beginning of the project, the sources and styles of qualitative data, data required for different methods, and when data will be useful and when not. We emphasize the agency of the researcher in making data collaboratively with “subjects,” and the ways data are crafted to meet the research goal from the beginning of the project.

All methods share the goal of deriving new understandings and making theory out of data. But novice researchers are often unable to get a sense of the research experience behind these goals. What is a category? How would I know one if I found one? What should coding *do* for you? What is it *like* to create theory? In the remaining chapters in Part II, we discuss and demonstrate the tools for handling and coding data and for theorizing. Starting with abstraction, we move to the common processes of using and developing categories and linking them to data through coding. In Chapter 6, we examine the central and varied processes of coding and the different ways in which researchers can use coding to move between data and ideas. Chapter 7 deals with the goal of abstracting and “theme-ing,” or “thinking up” from the data, which is common to all methods. In Chapter 8, we return to the theme of methodological fit. We revisit the same five methods, focusing now on what working in that method is like. For each, we discuss the ways of working with data and the analytic strategies most commonly used in that method, as well as the differences within it.

The chapters in Part III, “Getting It Right,” are concerned with the process of completing qualitative analysis so that it works for the researcher’s purposes. In Chapter 9, we discuss what is involved in getting analysis right, as well as the ways researchers can know if it is wrong. Chapter 10 deals with reporting results and writing them up, ensuring that a qualitative project will be credible and persuasive, and ways in which researchers can aim for these goals.

Thus, this book ends with a beginning. Chapters 11 and 12 in Part IV, “Beginning Your Project,” end the book by describing the groundwork researchers need to do to begin their own projects once they have understood the choice of method and the tasks of research to follow.

We recommend that while researchers wait for the permissions they need to begin their projects, they “get skilled” by selecting and learning to use appropriate software for their analysis. We finish with encouraging words to get the new researcher started.

Appendix 1 is a guide to finding software tools. Appendix 2 discusses how to apply for funding.

DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: WHAT TO EXPECT

This book is intended to be read at the inception of a project and reread as needed until writing is completed. We recommend that you consult it when you wonder why you are doing this or that or where your current path is taking you.

So what will it be like? Qualitative researchers differ greatly from quantitative researchers in the way they approach research. Usually, qualitative researchers start with *areas of interest* or general, rather than specific, research questions. They may not know very much about the topic at the start, and even if they do, they seek to learn more through the data. To do this, they must be flexible. You need to start with a broad understanding about the general area, be receptive to new ideas and willing to relinquish old—but unsupported—favorite ideas, and obtain a notion of the boundaries from the phenomenon studied. In all qualitative methods, one goal is to create categories and linkages systematically from the data, confirm these linkages, and create theory. You will find it is easier to achieve this objective if you understand the entire research process and have an overview of the entire project, knowing what steps come next.

If you are approaching qualitative research with no idea of what it will be like, this book offers a sketch. It is not, of course, a picture of an ideal project (or any real project), but an impression of the ways things tend to develop. It gives a simple overview of the research process and the ways in which you might interface with *Readme First*. If this sketch were to represent reality, it would be a mess of loops and double-headed arrows—qualitative research is more often cyclical than linear. But although you cannot expect a tidy procession of stages, qualitative research usually has some predictable progress; during most projects, there are series of periods during which a few things happen simultaneously. We revisit this picture in the final chapter.

Even before selecting a research topic, you must understand the nature of qualitative methods. You must know what qualitative methods *can do* and *cannot do*, where and for what kinds of problems and questions they should be used, and what kind of information is obtained through the use of various qualitative methods. We start with this point in the next chapter.

The process of learning to think qualitatively—to think like a qualitative researcher—can be challenging. If you do not have training, our best advice is that you read basic introductory texts, take an introductory course, talk to researchers about their experience and read their studies, and find and read *critically* a wide range of published works by researchers who have employed different qualitative methods. Such a broad overview will give you a feel for the field. Ask yourself: What kinds of questions are best answered using qualitative methods? What kinds of qualitative methods are best used with certain questions? What is the relationship between the data and the emerging results? What does “good” research look like? Explore how research results vary in their level of theoretical development, from simply reporting and organizing quotations to creating sophisticated and elegant theories. Ask yourself why some research seems satisfying and some less so. You should be asking all these questions simultaneously.

Becoming Focused

Read *Readme First*. Learn to think qualitatively.

Read other texts, take a course, and talk to researchers. Reflect on, refine, and define a topic area. Start to shape a research question.

Where will you start? Once an area of interest has led to existing research, a qualitative researcher usually locates a *topic*—not a specific question and very rarely a research location or sample. This is not a methodological or moral imperative, but if you start, for example, with a particular group you wish to study, you may find it hard to broaden your vision to a wider context. So resist the temptation to move directly to research design or, worse, to make a list of the questions you are going to ask your study participants.

If you approach the topic from a broad perspective, it will lead you to the literature. There, you can examine and analyze other studies critically, both within the context of the proposed research and within the context of the researchers' disciplines. But, most important, you should examine the literature *qualitatively*. It is not enough to summarize or synthesize others' results. Rather, you need to examine the theoretical perspective and method of each study, looking for overt and covert assumptions, beliefs, and values that contributed to the researcher's perspective, questions, selection of hypotheses, and interpretations of results. For a while, you should combine these tasks.

Becoming Competent Methodologically

Read extensively around the topic. Read extensively on the possible methods. Develop and learn the ways you will handle data. Narrow down your methodological options. Choose your software and learn it.

Such a critical appraisal of the literature is a student's first step in qualitative inquiry—and in qualitative analysis. This may also be your first step in handling qualitative data. You should treat the literature review as a data-managing exercise. As you work through this book, consider how each method we discuss might be applied to making sense of your reading (which, just like interview data, builds up in unstructured text records).

Now is the time to start *managing data* skillfully. If you are planning to use a computer program to handle your data, learn it *now* and use it to organize your notes and any discussions arising from the literature. Things move fast once you have located your study methodologically, and competence with your software will help you maintain the pace and maximize the exploration of data as they accumulate.

Your new understanding of the literature, and the acquired understanding of qualitative methods in general, will direct you toward the research question, the appropriate qualitative method, and, thus, the start of a research design. Resist the temptation to narrow the research question too far; you will refine and delimit it during the process of data collection. Resist any pressure to select your method until you are sure you know where your study fits.

Shaping the Study

Locate the study methodologically. Locate the study in the research field.
Work on and rework a research design. Start making some appropriate data.
Start data analysis *now*. Manage data and ideas.

Every researcher experiences this stage as a flurry of activity and impending chaos. Reading about method is imperative if you are to be sure-footed in your entry into the research field. The importance of learning to think theoretically will be evident as soon as you begin data collection. Any observation or piece of text can be seen in two ways: It can be taken at face value, or it can be viewed as theoretically rich, linked to other pieces of data, linked to existing theory, and linked to your ideas. Our best advice is that you take this stage of interlocking tasks carefully and slowly. Never allow the excitement and demands of the impending project to distract you from *designing* your research.

It is important at this point that you develop a systematic and simple means of documenting, linking, sorting, and storing these ideas. The system must be fluid so that the developing codes and categories remain malleable as the ideas change and evolve with your increasing comprehension. If you are using a computer program, talk to other users and partake in online discussions to gain a sense of what tools the program offers you and which ones you can use.

Note that you have now commenced analysis work: active, hard, deliberate cognitive work. You are not mindlessly gathering data as if picking apples; your analysis should be ongoing and never delayed until all data are in. If you are working qualitatively, it is the data-driven analysis that will tell you when the data are adequate.

Conceptualizing and Theorizing

Actively seek theory. Constantly check data. Explore complexity and context. Simplify and integrate. Sift, sort, and play with data.

Processes of making data and making the analysis continue. Your early ideas and data sortings look simplistic, but the “right” solutions often appear beyond your grasp. Although this is an intriguing and exciting stage, it can also be the most frustrating and most difficult one. Return to this volume for overviews of the data-handling and theory-generating processes. Ensure that you keep analyzing as you make data and that you allow the data to direct you to ideas that surprise you and that you had not previously thought to explore.

Explore your data from different perspectives. Play with your data. Pursue hunches and think outside of the tidy explanations. Write, write, write, and rewrite. Create models and discuss them. Confirm ideas in your data or collect additional data. Discuss your theories with anyone who will listen. Compare the emerging theory with the theories in the literature. And, most important, think! Consider the research as a puzzle to be solved, a solution as always possible, and the process as active mind work. Theory does not emerge overnight; data never “speak for themselves.”

Molding and Writing

Arrive at a best account of the data or theory to make sense of the data.

Tidy up and polish.

Write, present, and publish.

It may happen suddenly that all your research will come together and integrate in a flash of discovery, or it may happen slowly over a period of time. But, eventually, your research will make sense. The growing web of ideas and theory will be strong enough to support a story, an account, or an explanation that makes sense of the data. Your familiarity with the literature will have given you a sense of the final product but perhaps not of something achievable by you. Like all extraordinary experiences, it will be different from what you expected, and you will be astonished when it happens. You can *tell* your study. You have arrived at a solution—a beautiful, elegant solution—that is supported with data, connects with the literature, and makes sense in the research context. Your study, *if* tidied up and polished, will make an important contribution to the literature.

Keep the momentum going until your study is published and accessible to all. And when that is done, with great pomp and ceremony, give *Readme First* to a friend.

RESOURCES

Read widely among the available basic texts to get a feel for how to approach qualitative analysis.

Major Resources

- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- The five approaches covered in this text are biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Each chapter is a solid review of a pertinent topic; a comprehensive overview of qualitative inquiry.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- This text gives an overview of qualitative methods and clear discussion of many of the current issues students confront.
- Mayan, M. (2009). *Essentials of qualitative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- An excellent overview for doing qualitative inquiry.
- Munhall, P. L. (2012). *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective*. Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett.
- Richards, L. (2009). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- This is a companion work to *Readme First*, the present book. It advises on what to do when you have data, with detailed advice on the tasks and techniques described in the next chapters. On the companion website (<http://www.sagepub.co.uk/richards/>) there are case studies of methods in practice, detailing the researcher's experience, and advice on starting to work with qualitative software.

Additional Resources

- Bernard, H. R. (2000). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Ezzy, D., Liamputtong, P., & Hollis, D. B. (2005). *Qualitative research methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Grbich, C. (1999). *Qualitative research in health: An introduction*. Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- Lewins, A., & Silver, C. (2007). *Using qualitative software: A step-by-step guide*. London: Sage.
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- Prasad, P. (2005). *Crafting qualitative research: Working in the post positivist tradition*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Ritchie, J., & Lewis, J. (Eds.). (2004). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J., & Silverman, D. (2004). *Qualitative research practice*. London: Sage.

Part I

THINKING RESEARCH

Chapter 2. The Integrity of Qualitative Research

Chapter 3. Choosing a Method

Chapter 4. Qualitative Research Design

2

The Integrity of Qualitative Research

When commencing a qualitative research project, it is essential that the researcher understand not only the variety of methods available but also that in each there is a relationship between research question, method, and desired results. In this chapter, we introduce the researcher to choosing a topic, and, considering context, how this leads to a method. Choice of method will locate the project, indicating what is possible for the research to achieve, what the researcher can ask and hope to have answered, and how it is to be done. Thus, question, method, data, and analysis fit together. Once a researcher recognizes this fit, the choice of a method for any particular study is never arbitrary, and qualitative research, although a venture into the unknown, is purposeful and goal directed.

Not all qualitative methods integrate all aspects of the project in the same manner, and most contain considerable variety. In this overview, we stress the two principles of qualitative methods that inform the rest of this book: methodological *purposiveness* and methodological *congruence*. We illustrate these by comparing five very different and widely used qualitative methods.

METHODOLOGICAL PURPOSIVENESS

There is almost always a best way to do any research project, a particular method best suited to each particular problem. The choice of best method always comes from the research purpose.

Of course, the choice is never entirely open. It is always constrained by something—the researcher’s familiarity with methods, the researcher’s resources, or sometimes the data themselves. Researchers starting from the availability of particularly interesting data will quite normally have their methodological options predetermined. Although this can be restricting, such researchers may well be envied by others confronting too many choices: a general topic area, many possibilities for making data, and no methodological direction. Researchers in the latter group, in turn, may be tempted to claim constraint (“I have to do a grounded theory study because that’s the only sort of qualitative research accepted in my school”). But that’s where the danger lies—in a topic shoehorned into a particular method. Some seasoned researchers work the other way around, through commitment to one method, which means they ask only (even, it might appear, *can* ask only) certain sorts of questions. But they start with questions, and they must always be open to the possibility that a question requires a different method.

Especially when choice of method seems constrained, it is important to understand the process by which a method is selected, and to see the selection as *deliberate* and as reflecting research purpose. The purpose may be to learn about a specific problem (e.g., “Why do residents not use the facilities?”) or to understand a situation (“I wonder what the experience of . . . is”). Or the purpose may be no more specific than to learn more about a particular topic or to do justice to those interesting data that suddenly became available. In such a project, exploring the literature and spending time in the setting will help the researcher focus on a clearer problem and frame a sharper research question, and the data will direct further inquiry. A decision about method does not just happen by default. A purpose, however unspecific, guides the researcher to a more focused research question and, hence, to a choice of method.

The researcher actively creates the link between purpose and method through a process of reflecting on purpose, focusing on a researchable question, and considering how to address it. That link is never, of course, a simple one-way causal connection. It is helpful to commence with an opening *armchair walkthrough*, considering several routes and several methodological vehicles. The appropriate approach may not be a qualitative method. Sometimes the research purpose opens out to several research questions, each requiring a different qualitative method, or the interplay of qualitative and quantitative methods. But, however it is arrived at, the link of purpose to method is what gets a project going.

Why Are You Working Qualitatively?

Why did you select a qualitative method? Often, the researcher has a very practical goal for beginning the project. It may be to understand an unanticipated problem area in the classroom or a particularly puzzling patient situation that the experts seem unable to explain. It may be to throw light on an area in which patterns of behavior are statistically clear (changes in the birthrate, for instance) but researchers can only guess at reasons for these patterns without an understanding of people's own accounts of their behavior. It may be to inform a policy area (such as urban planning) where the best-laid plans are thwarted by apparently irrational choices (incredibly, the slum dwellers didn't want to be relocated!). In each of these cases, the researcher chose to work qualitatively, with complex unstructured data from which new understandings might be derived. Below, we summarize the two major reasons for working qualitatively—the research question requires it, and the data demand it.

The Research Question Requires It

For many of us, the first really good moment in a project occurs when we see how the research purpose can be pursued by one but not another means. In retrospect, this may be blindingly obvious. For instance, you need to understand what children *mean* to parents in this society before you can predict fertility rates, so what you must do is listen to parents' stories of parenthood rather than ask predetermined questions about birth control. The only way of making sense of classroom problems is to get an understanding of the latent processes of power—observe, listen to what is said in the classroom and the staff room, and examine the words and their meanings rather than simply distribute a questionnaire. What if the apparently irrational behavior of slum dwellers makes sense to them? The only way to find out is to hang around and observe their daily life, rather than assume that the condition of their housing is their top priority. Each of these purposes points toward one of the methods we compare throughout this book.

Researchers who are brought (sometimes kicking and screaming) to a qualitative method driven by the topic often combine qualitative with quantitative methods. They may recognize their need to understand and to develop meaning prior to or subsequent to, rather than instead of, a quantitative study. Perhaps they require a larger-scale inquiry or systematic

testing of hypotheses. In such situations, a qualitative component may precede a quantitative project and provide different types of findings for richer results, or input into the questions to be asked in a subsequent survey. Or results of the quantitative study may be explored in detail through qualitative study of particular cases. (We address ways in which qualitative and quantitative methods can be combined in Chapter 5.)

The Data Demand It

It may be, however, that you have no such research purpose directing you to work qualitatively. What, then, might lead you to a method? A powerful push can come from recognition of what data you can possibly, and properly, use. Some data can be obtained only through the use of a particular strategy. For example, it is not possible to interview some participants; very young children who cannot talk or elderly persons with Alzheimer's disease may not be able to provide coherent responses. In these situations, researchers may use observational strategies, obtaining data in the form of field notes or video recordings. This will be the first of many times in the project when data seem to be driving the study. Recognizing such imperatives will always take you forward, because qualitative methods are properly responsive to discoveries in data.

Many quantitatively trained researchers first started working qualitatively because they recognized that the statistical analyses of particular survey responses did not seem to fit what those in the situations of interest said or what people wrote in their open-ended answers. In avoiding the temptation to dismiss their participants' open-ended responses or to use them merely to illustrate the reports, perceptive researchers sought ways to analyze them. Action researchers might be brought to qualitative methods by complex social or political situations in which understanding all sides of a controversy is essential but the available documents and discussions defy neat categorization. For a study to be useful, the researcher must make sense of such a situation. Practitioners might observe and record the complexities of clinical situations that seem to be denied by tidy reports of patient compliance; in seeking an understanding of that complexity, they find they need ways of doing justice to the data.

Coming to a qualitative method because your data require it provides high motivation but often high stress, too. The survey must be reported, the action group informed, the patients helped; it seems that you must

become an instant qualitative researcher. If this is your situation, we recommend that you go carefully through the nine points we list in Chapter 13 under the heading “How Do You Start?”

Should You Be Working Qualitatively?

The obvious first question is whether the research purpose is best answered by qualitative methods. We hope we have made it clear that we see nothing morally or methodologically superior about qualitative approaches to research. Other things being equal, a quantitative project will often be faster, easier for a researcher lacking qualitative training, and arguably more acceptable in many research contexts. Moreover, the research world is replete with questions that are properly and effectively answered quantitatively and that will be badly answered, or not answered at all, if a qualitative method is imposed on them. Forcing such questions into qualitative methods has the same effect on projects and researchers as Cinderella’s ugly stepsisters’ forcing the glass slipper onto their feet had on their marriage prospects—it won’t work, it will hurt a lot, and the result is a loss of credibility.

Our goal in this book is not to examine the philosophical origins of qualitative methods or the approaches to evidence and “reality” behind different methodologies, but it is important to note that we see no chasm between qualitative and quantitative techniques. In our experience, many qualitative projects involve counting at some stage, and many questions are best answered by quantification. But given that we aim here to give those embarking on qualitative research an understanding of what it will be like, we assume that you, the reader, are about to embark. Thus, the obvious first question is whether you should do so.

Qualitative methods are the best or only way of addressing some research purposes and answering some sorts of questions, as in the following cases:

1. If the purpose is to understand an area where little is known or where previously offered understanding appears inadequate (thin, biased, partial), you need research methods that will help you see the subject anew and will offer surprises. Put bluntly, if you don’t know what you are likely to find, your project requires methods that will allow you to learn what the question is from the data.

2. If the purpose is to make sense of complex situations, multicontext data, and changing and shifting phenomena, you need ways of simplifying and managing data without destroying complexity and context. Qualitative methods are highly appropriate for questions where preemptive reduction of the data will prevent discovery.
3. If the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or a process the way *they* experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, you need methods that will allow you to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations. Qualitative methods have in common the goal of generating new ways of seeing existing data.
4. If the purpose is to construct a theory or a theoretical framework that reflects reality rather than your own perspective or prior research results, you may need methods that assist the creation of theory from data.
5. If the purpose is to understand phenomena deeply and in detail, you need methods for discovery of central themes and analysis of core concerns.

Each of these suggestions has a flip side. If you know what is being hypothesized and what you are likely to find, if you do not need to know the complexity of others' understandings, if you are testing prior theory rather than constructing new frameworks, or if you are simply describing a situation rather than deeply analyzing it, it is possible that you should *not* be working qualitatively. Perhaps the research question you are tackling with in-depth interviews would be more properly addressed with a survey. In such a case, our best advice is that you review your general purpose and ask yourself if it can be addressed better that way. Many purposes are perfectly served by survey data, and very many purposes require surveys. Important examples are research questions seeking to establish the associations among easily measured factors across a group or setting. If your goal is to establish that women in the paid workforce use neighborhood services less than do women who don't work outside the home, a survey will do it. But maybe what you really need to ask is how women in the paid workforce perceive neighborhood relations.

Or perhaps the research purpose can be addressed through the use of more straightforward techniques, such as quantitative content analysis. If you wish to know which words dominate discussions of medical

treatments, rather than the meanings the participants give those words, a qualitative approach is likely to delay your answer. But maybe you want to find out more—for example, maybe you want to discover whether dominant discourses underlie those discussions.

On reflection, in either of the above cases there might be aspects of the research topic that would be best addressed through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. As we will show in Chapter 5, such combinations fit easily with many qualitative methods.

Qualitative research is a proper response to some, but not all, research needs. We have both learned to be alert to risk in projects where the researcher is working qualitatively for the wrong reasons. These include reasons that are negative rather than positive (“I hate statistics” or “I can’t use computers”). We warn against assumptions that qualitative research is more humanistic, moral/ethical, worthy, feminist, radical, or admirable. The techniques we describe in the chapters that follow are often invasive, intrusive, and morally challenging; the only good reason a researcher should consider using them is that the research problem requires them.

Our point here is not just that you need a good reason for working qualitatively because of both practical and ethical considerations but also that you need to have thought your way to this method if you are to start learning it. Good qualitative research requires purpose, skill, and concentration, and unless you recognize this and your purpose is clear and committed, the task will quickly become onerous.

How Should You Be Working Qualitatively?

What we have described as a fit between research question and method is never a simple cause-and-effect relationship. As you decide on the focus and scope of your study, the firming up of research question will indicate the best method for you to use, and your reading on methods will suggest ways in which you can focus the study. In this and later chapters, we illustrate this fit by comparing just five of the qualitative methods commonly described in textbooks: ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, discourse analysis, and case study method.

These five methods answer quite different sorts of questions (see Table 2.1). Ethnography offers researchers tools to answer questions such as “What is happening here?” Researchers are directed to grounded theory by questions of interaction and process: “How does one

Table 2.1 The Fit of the Question to the Method	
<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Method That Might Be Appropriate</i>
Observational questions (e.g., What are the behavioral patterns of . . . ?) and descriptive questions (e.g., What is going on here?) about values, beliefs, and practices of a cultural group	Ethnography
Process questions about changing experience over time or its stages and phases (e.g., What is the process of becoming . . . ?) or understanding questions (e.g., What are the dimensions of this experience . . . ?)	Grounded theory
Questions about meaning (e.g., What is the meaning of . . . ?) and about the core or essence of phenomena or experiences	Phenomenology
Questions about the construction of social understanding (e.g., How is social reality formed through talk or writing?) or about the structure and content of discourse (e.g., How can we see power relationships by analyzing patterns of dominance in conversation?)	Discourse analysis
Focus and illustration questions (e.g., How do these problems appear in practice? How does one person/department/industry encapsulate the bigger picture?) or comparative questions (e.g., How different can the experience of communities be in different settings?)	Case study

become a . . . ?” Usually (but not always), phenomenology best addresses a question about meaning: “What is the experience of . . . ?” But if your focus is on people’s own accounts of their world, you may need discourse analysis. And if you want to understand that world through detailed comparison of particular examples, read up on case study method. The link between question and data is obvious when one contrasts these five “classic” methods.

From Selecting a Method to Making Data

As the purpose points to the research question and the research question informs the choice of method, so the method fits the type of data to be collected. (As shown in Table 2.2, the types of data required

Table 2.2 The Fit of Method and the Type of Data	
<i>Chosen Method</i>	<i>Likely Data Sources</i>
Ethnography	Primary: participant observation; field notes; unstructured or structured interviews or focus groups (sometimes audio or video recorded) with people in the identified site Secondary: documents, records; photographs; video recordings; maps, genograms, sociograms
Grounded theory	Primary: interviews (usually audio recorded); participant and nonparticipant observations; conversations recorded in diaries and field notes with sample decided by research topic Secondary: comparative instances; personal experience
Phenomenology	Primary: audio recorded, in-depth interviews or conversations with usually a very small number of participants; phenomenological literature Secondary: poetry; art; films
Discourse analysis	Primary: interviews (usually audio recorded) Secondary: written sources such as documents, diaries, media accounts
Case study	Selection of a small number of particular cases (instances or settings) to address a question or issue Primary: participant observation; field notes; unstructured or structured interviews; focus groups (sometimes audio or video recorded) Secondary: documents, records; focus groups

by particular methods overlap a lot.) However, selecting a method and making data are not discrete events in the research process; rather, they are aspects linked by common ways of thinking.

The distinction between a method and a way of making data is not at all rigid. For example, both focus groups and participant observation are ways of making data, appropriate for several different methods. But many researchers would consider them methods in their own right: Each has a substantial literature, setting out goals that fit these ways of making data. And case studies can be conducted by several different methods

(most commonly, ethnography and grounded theory); “case study method” is regarded as special because of the questions it asks and how they are answered.

In the chapters to come, we discuss types of data, ways of handling data, and analytic techniques that belong to no particular method and are used in many. For now, our goal is to suggest the ways some data fit some methods. This does not mean that a way of making data is a method or implies a method. The fact that you are interviewing people tells an observer nothing about why, or about what you will do with those data. But the content and form of interviews and what you see in them will be different for different methods. This is because *how you think about the data* differs from method to method.

From Choosing Sources and Sorts of Data to Managing and Analyzing Data

There is a further link in this methodological chain of research purpose, research question, choice of method, and the type of data needed. It is hardly surprising that the ways the researcher handles, manages, explores, and analyzes data are all part of the same chain. Consider, for example, that each of the methods sketched in Table 2.2 can use unstructured interviews. Most transcribe them. But the *form* of the interview and what they do with the interview transcript may be very different. Ethnographers use description to seek patterns and categories; grounded theorists use narratives and aim to create theory from them; phenomenologists initiate conversations and develop *themes* and seek *meaning*; discourse analysts dissect interviews in detail, and case study researchers compare them with those from other cases.

Thus, the difference is not in the technique per se but in the form of data and the way data are used. Different ways of approaching the research will mean the data are handled differently and the analytic techniques are used in different ways to produce different results. For example, researchers using very different methods may all code and, while coding, use the same technique—selecting a portion of text and assigning it to a category. But the similarity ends there. For each of them, the *way of approaching and thinking* about the data means that codes are applied in a particular way, and this results in *a particular way of linking data to ideas*.

The differences show when we ask questions such as the following: What is a category? What data are coded there? Is the collection of data

for a category the end or the beginning of analysis? How do you think about the category, and how do you use categories? The answers are very different from method to method. Although different qualitative methods may utilize similar strategies, *how you think* while using particular strategies differs. And how you think will be indicated by the method selected, which in turn is affected by *why you are doing this*. And, as shown in Table 2.1, the method will have been selected to best answer the question the researcher was to think about. The purpose of the research will also, therefore, influence whether a study is more descriptive or more theoretical. This is a distinction we will explore in later chapters.

We can expand Table 2.2, adding the mode of handling data and the analysis that fits; the results are displayed in Table 2.3.

<i>Method</i>	<i>Analysis Techniques</i>
Ethnography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thick description, rereading notes, storing information, storying; case analysis • Coding, diagramming to show patterns and processes
Grounded theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical sensitivity, developing concepts, coding into categories, open coding for theory generation • Focused memoing, diagramming, emphasis on search for core concepts and processes
Phenomenology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding and exploring themes, phenomenological reflection • Memoing and reflective writing to identify meanings
Discourse analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finely grained study (often by a set of protocols) of very detailed transcripts of spoken or written words (including pauses, turn taking, etc.) to identify ways in which social processes are constructed through conversations, deconstructing texts, and studying their patterns and contexts, often with the goal of unveiling hidden meanings or social processes
Case study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data from a small number of cases selected to inform a particular issue or problem are thoroughly described • Coding and summarizing data are focused by prior questions of theory to inform detailed understanding and comparison by contextual analysis of factors, events, or condition of interest

■■■ METHODOLOGICAL CONGRUENCE

In explaining the purposeful nature of qualitative inquiry, we arrive at our second principle of qualitative methods. Tables 2.1 through 2.3 show the way projects acquire *methodological congruence*—that is, fit between the research problem and the question; fit between the research question and the method; and, of course, fit among the method, the data, and the way of handling data. All these components of the research process mesh to help you provide the best possible answer to that question. Thus, each method is a distinctive way of approaching the world and data.

The concept of methodological congruence does not mean that data sources or analysis methods are predetermined once the researcher has chosen a method. It isn't that easy. Nor does it mean that a researcher has no flexibility once embarked on a particular path. Rather, it indicates that projects entail congruent ways of thinking. The researcher working with phenomenology must learn to think phenomenologically if the fit of purpose, method, and data is to work well. If you are working with grounded theory, it is important that you learn how to think as a grounded theorist. The same sorts of data (e.g., field notes) will be interpreted differently by researchers using different methods, and similar data analysis techniques (e.g., coding) employed by researchers using different methods will have quite different analytic results, *because each researcher is thinking a different way*.

Qualitative research is not just a matter of performing techniques on data; rather, each qualitative method has a specific way of thinking about data and using techniques as tools to manipulate data to achieve a goal. Each component of the research process is linked to the next, and the chosen method dictates combinations of strategies to be used in particular ways to ensure consistency throughout the research process.

Seeing Congruence by Doing It

The webs of methodological congruence are most easily illustrated by an exploration of the different ways a real research topic can be handled. In what follows, we present a fictitious project concerning human attachment. If you have data from a previous study or a growing sense of your

research interest, you might try applying what you read below to your approaches to that topic.

What is “human attachment”? Which literature should we look to? We have many choices—we could look at the literature on bonding between mothers and infants, at the family studies literature on family relationships, or even at the social support literature. We could extend this to the relationship literature on interaction, the literature on marriage, or the literature on mothering. We could choose a situation in which we could observe the concept as well as obtain personal accounts of attachment. From our broad topic and scan of the literature, let’s choose to study public displays of attachment behavior at the arrivals and departures gates at airports. There, we could observe attachment (and detachment) behaviors as passengers depart or as they greet family and friends on arrival. We could interview individuals (the passengers themselves or their relatives and friends) about the experience of greeting and leaving. Or we may consider interviewing “experts” who have observed many passengers greeting or leaving each other (porters, staff at car rental booths, security personnel waiting to check carry-on luggage, cleaning staff, and so on).

Given this topic (human attachment) and having identified a research context, our next step is to create a research question. Different questions will lead us to particular methods, and the method in turn will help us decide details of the research design, such as who the participants will be, what the sample size should be, how data will be created and analyzed, and, most important, what type of results we will obtain.

Let us explore the topic by conducting an *armchair walkthrough*—that is, by taking a mindful stroll through the topic and visualizing what it might look like when we anticipate doing the study using each of the five major methods sketched above. The first concern of all qualitative researchers is locating the project. The setting for the research must be one in which the phenomena of interest are likely to be seen—frequently and in an intense form. Those we choose to interview must be “expert participants,” with much experience with the phenomena of interest. We must deliberately and purposefully select a setting or context where we will best see what we want to study. We do not usually choose a place or a sample randomly, for we would then have to rely on luck to see what we are interested in; we do not choose the “average” experience, as then the characteristics of the phenomena are diluted and less evident.

THE ARMCHAIR WALKTHROUGH

How does one prepare to do a research study? Obviously, one may approach a particular problem in several different ways, developing several different questions, so that each one could be answered using a different method and could produce a slightly different result. Which one is best, and how is that determined?

One way to reduce the uncertainty is by conducting an armchair walk-through (Morse, 1999)—that is, by mentally going through the process. If I ask *this* research question, then I will need to use *this* particular method, seek *this* type of data and involve *these* participants, ask *these* interview questions, and handle and analyze data *this* particular way, and the results will be in *this* form. On the other hand, if I do it using *that* method, then I will ask the questions *that* way, use *that* method, and involve *those* participants; data will look *that* way, and my results will be in *that* form.

By conducting an armchair walkthrough, we are trying to predict the research process and the outcome rather than going into research blindly. In this way, without losing flexibility or the ability to change some of our choices, we can focus on the data rather than on decisions about the administration of research. Although this type of conceptualizing will not detect every problem that may be encountered, it lets us get some sense of what we may learn by using each method. It allows for some level of informed choice about which method has the potential to provide the most suitable type of results, and it is helpful as we make preliminary preparation for writing the proposal. On the other hand, we need to be aware that such decisions are not carved in stone, and we should always be prepared to reevaluate and make changes if necessary. Table 2.4 displays the thinking that came out of the armchair walkthrough for our hypothetical project, “Arrivals and Departures: Patterns of Human Attachment.”

AND NOW—YOUR TOPIC?

“What are you studying?” is possibly the most common question asked of the researcher, and it is also quite often the most troublesome one. Interestingly, the issue of how to find a topic is not answered in any of the textbooks on qualitative research. This is because when you select a

Table 2.4 Comparison of Five Methods to Conduct a Hypothetical Project, “Arrivals and Departures: Patterns of Human Attachment”

<i>Method</i>	<i>Research Question</i>	<i>Setting and Participants</i>	<i>Strategies</i>	<i>Types of Results</i>
Ethnography	What are the patterns of human attachment displayed during arrivals and departures at the airport?	Airport departure and lounge arrival; passengers, friends, relatives, experts at the scene (porters, airport personnel); about 30 to 50 informants	Unstructured, audio recorded interviews and participant observation at the gate; field notes and other documents	Description of the patterns of greeting behaviors or styles of farewell
Grounded theory	What is the process of greeting or leaving your family?	Interviews anywhere; observations at the airport gate of passengers, family members; about 30 to 50 participants	Audio recorded interviews and observations; new data as theory directs research	Theory about leaving and reunion; focus on the social-psychological processes
Phenomenology	What is the meaning of separation from or rejoining your spouse?	Interviews at interviewees' convenience; person who has traveled recently; perhaps 6 to 10 in each group	In-depth audio recorded conversations; reflection on the phenomenological literature and other sources	In-depth reflective description of the experience of separating from or rejoining your spouse
Discourse analysis	What do messages displayed and words used show about attachment and its place in social structure?	The departures lounge as a source of meaning and the words people use there	Texts—those displayed in public places and (recorded) those written or spoken by people there	Critical account of the construction of “family” or “belonging” by the setting and the conversations
Case study	How do social attachments and the ways they are expressed differ by national location?	Cases of departure settings selected to show contrasts: airports in several very different countries	Observation and interviews with officials and with passengers and their families	Vivid accounts of the different sites, compared to give pictures of social differences

Source: Morse (1994a). Reprinted in part with permission from SAGE Publications, Inc.

topic, you still have not started the research project. Selecting a topic involves also seeing the *purposiveness* of the study and the *congruence* of question, method, and what your project will be like.

Selecting the topic also involves selecting where you will go to do the study—it is not the research question you ask when you get there, or the method you use to answer it. If you find yourself telling inquirers, “I’m *doing* classroom authority/nurses’ experiences of chosen childlessness/inflicting pain . . .” listen to the words you are using. The researcher does not “do” a topic as the mindless tourist “does” Belgium, checking off museums between France and Scandinavia. The *topic* of a research project is where it is *located*, where you are going to place your study—not what you will ask, how you will ask it, or how your research will provide answers when you are there. (Incidentally, the term comes from Aristotle’s *Topics*, which contains *commonplace* arguments, from the Greek *topikos*, “of a place.”)

A topic may be any researchable area, subject, or experience (such as an organization, living in a community, or having a particular learning disability), a concept (such as corporate structure, classroom learning, social support, or coping), a setting (such as a boardroom, a school, a village, or a hospital ward), a group of persons (such as teachers, doctors, or teenagers), some aspect of their everyday activities (such as teachers’ talk in the lounge), or activities that are unusual (case studies of teaching students with dyslexia). Those are all research locations or areas within which research questions can be defined. A topic may combine perspectives, so a researcher may be able to make an important argument for studying one of the above topics in a particular group by asserting that the experience of that group is sufficiently different from the experiences of other groups reported in the literature.

You may have several topics burning to be researched. The challenge, then, is to walk through each, asking how questions would be framed and what sorts of research they would require and, importantly, whether you could do this, given your skills and resources. Or you may have no topic but, instead, a requirement that you get a project up and running. It seems harder to start that way, because then research presents itself as the push of duty, not the pull of interest in a topic. Wanted: a good topic!

How to Find a Topic

Any attempt to summarize reasons for selecting a topic runs the risk of appearing to present the process as orderly. It usually is not. Insights

about suitable topics occur to researchers as they stand on high hills, while they are in the shower, or when they are in the library; topics demand attention when you are trying to do something else. A sort of typology is possible, however. If you are stumped, try locating your research in each of the five ways listed below. But remember to locate the project to ask how your topic would be studied and what the outcome project would be like.

You Are Already There

“Already being there” is undoubtedly the most common reason for topic selection. It is also the most exciting and the most dangerous. Because you are there, you possibly have, or may be convinced that you have, intimate knowledge of the topic as a participant. It seems you can get going fast—the preparatory work has been done. You are familiar with the setting and comfortable with the people there. But be careful: You were there for reasons other than research (such as employment or group membership or shared experience). These required a different type of preparatory work for you to become a good participant observer or impartial interviewer in the setting. Being a researcher there may perhaps provide you with the opportunity to contribute new knowledge to an area you care about. And so you may, but you will have to ensure that your contribution represents valued research results and not merely what you wanted to prove or get done as a participant. If these ends are the same, you will have to be especially careful to establish that they were the same and that your study is rigorous. Being there means you already feel you know what matters—or who is a problem—the importance of particular people (including you), and the ways they are seen. How do you plan to deal with these preconceptions?

There Is a Gap in the Literature

Topics amenable to qualitative inquiry have often been relatively ignored in the literature. Of course, this may be because they are inaccessible to researchers or, worse, simply uninteresting. The fact that nobody has studied a particular topic is not a good reason for taking it up. On the other hand, such topics may be neglected because they are areas in need of qualitative inquiry, areas where framing clear questions is not easy, areas that are difficult to access, or areas obscured by received interpretations.

Of course, this is a double-edged sword. If a topic has not been investigated, you will have an explorer's challenge of discovering a new place, mapping the area, displaying it to an admiring world, maybe even getting your name on it. Classic qualitative research projects have opened up whole areas of investigation in this way. With the second wave of feminism, qualitative studies returned to topics in the hitherto taken-for-granted social lives of women, opening up research areas addressing motherhood, social support networks, and even housework.

However, undiscovered places are hard to sell. This is particularly important if you are a student applying for funding for research expenses. Research into topics that are "fashionable"—that is, topics that a number of other researchers are also investigating (or have investigated)—is generally easier to get funded, but there is usually a considerable amount of literature on those topics in the library already.

Another Way of Looking Is Needed

You might suspect that the literature is poorly focused or that there is something wrong, invalid, or inaccurate about the presentation and interpretation of the topic. Perhaps the received knowledge does not fit with the evidence, or results of the studies reported in the literature have been presented within the context of a theory that is invalid or inappropriate. It is time to take a fresh look at the phenomenon and reexamine the theory from within, taking into consideration the perceptions of those being studied. In recent decades, women's studies and studies of health and illness exemplify this approach, as qualitative studies challenged the functionalist paradigm, reopening questions of power and conflict.

What's Going on Here?

Qualitative methods are frequently used to discover the answers to quite pragmatic questions, such as "What is going on here?" or "How are we doing with this innovation?" Evaluation studies are of this type: The researchers are trying to understand and describe efficiently the processes or structures of particular phenomena. Much action research sets out to find out "what is going on here"—the topic is "here," this community, this fight, this local government organization, and so on.

Many such studies produce reports that are more descriptive than theoretical. Their goal is to do a really good job of describing what's going

on, giving vivid illustrations so the problem or situation can be clearly seen by the reader. Thus, a researcher evaluating an educational innovation is not likely to divert to reflections on the meanings of education or try to create a new theory about the relation of teacher and pupil. The researcher's task is to do a good job of observing and reporting the evaluation and its effects. Case study method is often used in such studies to highlight different responses or important common experiences.

Supplementing Quantitative Inquiry

The topic may be an area where there is considerable knowledge of events or patterns from quantitative research, or where quantitative work needs prior backgrounding. The qualitative project may form the groundwork for subsequent quantitative inquiry or be used to supplement quantitative inquiry, or quantitative inquiry may be used to illustrate qualitative inquiry. The end result of a qualitative project may be insight into a problem, a rich description, a hypothesis, a theory to be tested further in quantitative research, or a qualitatively derived theory that is ready to use. You should consider the purpose of the qualitative project before commencing the project and selecting the method.

Now, Consider the Research Context

Once you have a topic—and maybe even a research question—there are many other considerations for selecting a method, and this section is intended to make you street-smart before you make your choice. While your choice comes from what you want to be the end results, constraints and benefits arise during the course of doing the research.

Considering What You Want to Know

First and foremost, think about the nature of your study. Do you want to describe what is there, exactly as it is presented, or to reveal what is there but not normally noticed? Or do you want to stand back and describe structures that are larger than normally viewed? Such *descriptive research* has its own set of standards, own methods, own data collection strategies, and own ways of ensuring validity and reliability. Think of it as looking at life, or slices of life, and recording as accurately as possible what

is going on. Descriptive methods include ethnography, ethology, ethnology, video ethnography, and historical methods. They record: They may use photographs, videos, recorded dialogue, and documents such as maps, sociograms, and kinship charts. They document and evaluate. Because they have data in a form that can be verified, checked and rechecked, certain procedures for determining the rigor of the study are important—these often include interrater reliability checks. Data have been recorded in a permanent form (videos, recorded conversations, documents) that can be rechecked, reviewed, reexamined, and reanalyzed, or the researcher can return to the field and reexamine the evidence.

Or do you need to use more *interpretive methods*, methods that provide access to more subjective phenomena, or “softer” data—experience, perception, opinions, values, meanings, beliefs, dreams, things that are not directly accessible or sometimes not even evident on the surface? Access may be helped by the use of a theoretical perspective (for instance, feminist theory ties together observations about gender imbalances). Phenomenology and hermeneutics are examples of interpretive methods. For more on interpretive methods, see Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and Thorne (2008).

Or would you be best served by methods that use both description and interpretation? Grounded theory is in this category, commencing inquiry with descriptive method to identify the process but using interpretive methods later in the process to identify the core variables (Strauss, 1987) or the basic social process (Glaser, 1978), the theme that ties the process together and makes sense of the data. Most ethnographic methods both describe and interpret.

Considering What You Are Studying

Now, there are constraints depending on what you are planning to study. Is the phenomenon concrete, tangible, stable—will it always be there for you to see and photograph and touch? Or is it hidden, shadowed, internal experience? Is it a moving target? Do you have just one shot at seeing it? Is it unique, or will it reoccur? Is it patterned? Does it change over time or disappear in certain conditions? In other words, how will you see/record whatever you are studying? These questions will inform your research design. Will you have direct access to the people you want to understand or have to rely on others’ observations of the phenomenon you are researching? Such “shadowed data” (Morse, 2001) will

require a different design. For instance, when studying a bereaved family, we may interview other family members about the behaviors of the most bereft member. Another “indirect” method may be to use modeling (for instance, if lay births cannot be observed, you might ask the lay midwife to show you how she positions the laboring women and collect information that way).

Considering the Setting

Privacy legislation and the right of participants must always be considered when accessing populations. Is the setting in which you want to conduct your study private or public? Obviously, a person’s home is private and you may not enter without permission or begin your study without consent. But privacy has other levels. Institutions, such as hospitals or schools, are protected environments, and many levels of permission are necessary before a researcher may enter. We consider ethics issues and processes in detail in Chapter 12.

Considering What You Want to Do

Researchers usually have a goal or agenda for conducting their research—and some of these reasons for doing a project are less problematic than others.

The best reason for doing a project may be “because it is fascinating” in itself. You can’t stop thinking about, reading about, and talking about the topic. This is a great start because your fascination provides that impetus to keep you motivated through the months ahead, and gives you determination to complete your project when the going gets tough and the research tasks a little arduous.

Perhaps the most common reason for doing a project, however, is the researcher’s personal experience. Perhaps they have recently divorced, experienced the death of a parent, or have some professional specialty and are convinced that nobody understands. Suddenly, doing a qualitative study seems to be a way to communicate their experience. One method—autoethnography—is designed for such reflection. Our advice is that qualitative research is not usually an effective way to work through your problems.

A third reason is perhaps the most risky—the researcher has an “axe to grind.” You have noticed a problem at work or an injustice that needs

to be explored—a fired coworker or some unfortunate caregiving experience or teaching incident. Investigating such issues seems a way to right the world. An inexperienced student may be accepted quickly in groups tackling such political issues. But this does not promise a good research design. As for all the examples above, the message is that you must be clear about why you are interested and want to tackle the topic you have selected, and how this will impact the research.

Considering Issues in Finding Participants

There are obvious constraints on finding and approaching participants for any research, and there are considerable specific constraints if your research is qualitative.

At the beginning of your project, you ask who you need to talk to for this project, and whether it will be possible. Whether it will be ethical is the next question (see below). Often, the answer to both is negative. Obviously, you cannot explore infant pain by interviewing the preverbal. Would it do to conduct behavioral coding and analyze the nature and patterns of crying? You cannot interview the elderly with advanced Alzheimer's disease, but is the alternative of some type of observational research satisfactory? Access to potential participants may be blocked, for instance in trauma care, because care is the first priority. In the case of family violence, the actual incident cannot be observed, so you must use retrospective data—interviews from participants about the experience.

Considering Ethical Constraints

At the earliest stage, the researcher must consider the ethical implications of what their topic and method seem to require. We consider these issues in detail in Chapter 12 when we return to the process of beginning your project.

Almost all the methods discussed above ensure invasion of privacy. Some seriously threaten a participant's rights. From the beginning of your project, these issues should be foremost in your concerns. Sensitivity about context and the participants' expectations is a necessary condition for good research design. Ethical as well as practical considerations must be explored. If you are planning to do research with vulnerable populations (such as groups in schools, prisons, hospitals, or some cultural groups), you must obtain special permission at the institutional level as well as from the guardian or parent, care provider, and individual. But "ordinary

people” also require full protection of their privacy. Once you have obtained access, you must have in place strategies to protect the participants’ identities. Consider early who will have access to the raw data. How will it be stored? How will identities of participants or places be protected? Who will have access to the final report? And who will need to review it or approve it prior to publication?

Working with the appropriate bodies is essential to ensure acceptable practices. Attention to the impact of the proposed research, and to changing conditions, allows researchers to negotiate access and allows ethics bodies to ensure that the access is appropriate. For instance, Morse was denied access for recording trauma care (audio and video) in the mid-1990s in Canada but was permitted access in the United States, where such video recording is a routine part of quality assurance. Video files were secured until consents were obtained, and if consent was not obtained the recording was destroyed. Once the Canadian ethics review committee considered how such procedures worked, on reapplication, they permitted the project to proceed.

From Topic to Researchable Question: Focusing Qualitative Inquiry

Deciding on a topic locates your research; this is where you are researching. Framing a qualitative question is harder because it requires that you think about what needs to be asked and of whom in this research location, as well as what you can practically and ethically ask and reasonably expect to have answered given your resources and skills. A research question is a starting point only if it is researchable.

One of the most difficult tasks for the beginning researcher is to think qualitatively before the research begins. A researchable qualitative question is not the most obvious outcome of reflecting on a topic. The big first questions are as follows:

-  *What* needs to be asked?
-  *How* should it be asked? What data are required, and where will the researcher have to go to find answers to these questions?
-  *Can* it be asked? What access to the setting is necessary and what protection of the informants? What sort of a researcher or research stance is needed?

WHAT CAN YOU AIM FOR?

By now it should be clear that qualitative researchers are aiming for an outcome that is more than just a good story. It's the fit of method, data, and analysis that makes the difference between journalism and qualitative research. Good journalism and good qualitative research share goals of understanding people's situations, thoroughly researching and vividly illustrating what's found. But all qualitative methods aim for abstraction and analysis, a "higher" level of reporting that is not *only* description. (Robert Park, a founder of the Chicago School of Sociology and a journalist by training, called sociology "the Big News.")

And it will be a particular sort of analysis. In all the examples given above, the outcome is something *new*—a better, fuller account of the data or a discovery *from the data*. This goal explains much in the techniques for handling data throughout this book. Qualitative coding, for example, aims to retain the detail of the data so it can be explored and rethought. The researcher resists, or delays, reducing that detail to numbers, since doing so would prevent further discovery. Unlike much (though not all) quantitative research, the qualitative project is unlikely to be testing existing theories. Much more likely is that a new theory or a new explanation of the phenomenon studied will be created from the data.

These are not unreachable goals. Discovered theories may be very small and local. In Chapter 8, we discuss the task of abstraction and the ways it is done. Meanwhile, as you work toward a topic, ask what you could aim for. What would be a good outcome of this study? What would be good enough, and what would be excellent? (For discussion of possible study outcomes, see Richards, 2009, Chapter 7.)

SUMMARY

We see the principles we have discussed in this chapter—the purposiveness of qualitative inquiry and methodological congruence—as the hallmarks of good qualitative research. They mean that a project's goals and its methods cannot be considered separately or severed from the strategies of a research design. A research strategy is only a *tool*, and how one uses a tool depends on the purpose of inquiry, the method used, and the

type of data. This is important: One may learn a strategy, but *the way one uses it depends on the method*.

In this chapter, we have emphasized the wholeness of methods—the fit of question, data, and analysis. In Chapter 3, we address the flip side of this wholeness: Although qualitative methods are congruent, they are not always complete, and they do not always fully direct each stage of the project. We compare the same five methods discussed above in terms of completeness, showing how some convey full instructions for the entire project whereas others leave the researcher to choose a methodological path.

RESOURCES

Read different types of qualitative research studies to get a feel for the differing results.

- Brizuela, D., Stewart, J. P., Carrillo, R. G., & Garbey, J. (2000). *Acts of inquiry and qualitative research*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ezzy, D., Liamputtong, P., & Hollis, D. B. (2005). *Qualitative research methods*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1998). Designing a qualitative study. In L. Bickman & D. J. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 69–100). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Morse, J. M., & Field, P. A. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for health professionals* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Richards, L. (2009). *Handling qualitative data: A practical guide* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J., & Silverman, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Qualitative research practice*. London: Sage.
- Wertz, F. J., Charmaz, K., McMullen, L. M., Josselson, R., Anderson, R., & McSpadden, E. (2011). *Five ways of doing qualitative analysis: Phenomenological psychology, grounded theory, discourse analysis, narrative research, and intuitive inquiry*. New York: Guilford.

Qualitative Research by Discipline

Not surprisingly, methods differ between disciplines. The following are suggested readings in different areas.

- Daymon, C., Holloway, I., & Daymon, C. (2002). *Qualitative research methods and public relations and marketing communications*. London: Routledge.

- Eisner, E. W., & Peshkin, A. (Eds.). (1998). *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Frost, N. (2011). *Qualitative research methods in psychology: Combining core approaches*. Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Gilgun, J. F., & Sussman, M. B. (Eds.). (1996). *The methods and methodologies of qualitative family research*. New York: Haworth.
- Golding, C. (2002). *Grounded theory: A practical guide for management, business, and market researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holloway, I. (2005). *Qualitative research in health care*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Science.
- Latimer, J. (Ed.). (2003). *Advanced qualitative research for nursing*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Mariampolski, H. (2001). *Qualitative market research: A comprehensive guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merriman, N. B. (1997). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Toronto: John Wiley.
- Munhall, P. L. (2012). *Nursing research: A qualitative perspective* (5th ed.). Boston: Jones & Bartlett.
- Padgett, D. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seale, C., Silverman, D., Gubrium, J., & Gobo, G. (Eds.). (2007). *Qualitative research practice*. London: Sage.
- Shaw, I. S., & Gould, N. (2001). *Qualitative research and social work*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ulin, P. R., Robinson, E. T., & Tolley, E. E. (2005). *Qualitative methods in public health: A field guide for applied research*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Journals

- Ethnography Field Methods Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (<http://qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.html>)
- International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/IJQM/index>)
- International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*
- International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health & Well-Being*
- Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*
- Qualitative Health Research*
- Qualitative Inquiry*
- Qualitative Report* (<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/>)
- Qualitative Research* (<http://qrj.sagepub.com/>)
- Qualitative Research Journal* (http://www.informit.com.au/products/ProductDetails.aspx?id=L_QRJ&container=qualitative-research-journal-link)

3

Choosing a Method

To those new to qualitative inquiry, the choice of research methods can appear overwhelming. But it has to be made, since the key to doing qualitative research is selecting the “best” method to answer your research question. How can you prepare to understand the choice and select the best?

It helps to start with commonalities. These are all called “qualitative” methods, and they do have a lot in common. All qualitative research seeks understanding of data that are complex and can be approached only in context. The methods we sketch in this book differ widely in how they do this and what the results look like, but all aim at constructing a new understanding using analytic processes that do justice to the data.

Some analytic strategies may appear common to several methods, and the ways they are applied within each method make those methods different from one another. The key to their differences is in the way *the researcher thinks about the data* and subsequently *conceptualizes*—that is, “thinks up” from data. In later chapters, we address some of the generic processes of coding, categorizing, and theme-ing and reintroduce the strategies that make methods distinct from one another. But here, our focus is on differences and choice.

The best method for your project will be the one that best helps you think about your data and work with data in the way best suited to your research goals. It may not be the one with the most unpronounceable name or the most scholarly aura. It is also unlikely to be the one your friend is using or the one you attended a workshop about or happen to have a book on or, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the method taught in your school. Rather, the best method is the one that promises to address *your* sort of research question, and to provide the results *your* project requires, as efficiently, effectively, and “on target” as possible. It will be the method that best enables you to access the slice of life you

need to study, and best report and reveal it to others. It is most likely to provide you with a new and exciting understanding of your topic—and might even earn you a degree, a publication, a chance to assist people in the studied situation, or another desired outcome.

In this chapter we will briefly sketch the five methods introduced in the previous chapter, according to the sorts of questions they ask, how they are asked, and what the outcomes look like. This overview is to offer you a map of methods so you may start thinking about matching your topic with a method. In the next sections we will address how to use research strategies and discuss how these strategies are used in each of the most commonly used methods.

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

To the new researcher, many of these methods appear similar or overlapping. Two methods may seem the same because they have certain procedures in common (such as a type of coding) or share some features with other methods (such as categorizing or “theme-ing”). Yet each method has an underlying logic that provides a distinct and different perspective on reality, and each method has its own particular approach to the strategies involved. While methods may share some of these strategies (or techniques), their analytic perspective gives each a unique and distinct way of *thinking about the data and reflecting on these data*.

How to distinguish them? To help you find your way with this map of various methods, we start with the distinction made in our previous chapter between description and interpretation. All methods describe and interpret, but they vary in the emphases they put on these tasks. The differences in research goals drive the emphases on description and interpretation, resulting in very different outcomes.

The more *descriptive methods* are those whose primary goal is to describe a situation or phenomenon vividly and in detail, to give a clear picture of “what is going on.” They are used when the researcher aims to reveal what is there, or link processes. The results may clarify problem situations, highlight differences in lifestyles, or make our lives richer by expanding our horizons or increasing our awareness of what we already know. Descriptive methods are used extensively to evaluate a program or organization, or to determine, detect, or monitor change. They are varied and often combined—and few stop at description.

The traditional descriptive method is ethnography. Originating in anthropology, its central approach to studying reality is a focus on the cultural context of behavior. Ethnography always uses the sometimes long-term and demanding technique of participant observation, often treated as a method in itself. Now used across disciplines, ethnography takes many forms, most interpretive and many aiming at critical reflection. Action research is often done by ethnographic techniques, and the researcher aims not just to describe but to involve participants in rigorous research and, through it, to change the situation over time.

Is any qualitative research entirely descriptive? Of the methods we compare in this chapter, the answer is no. For example, case study method, like ethnography, aims at very good description (often using ethnographic techniques). But any research starts with a goal, and for case studies, there is a prior reason why these cases were selected. So the project design should reach beyond description, usually to comparison of cases and elucidation of the issue or problem of *which they are cases*.

Across disciplines, possibly the most common source of descriptive research is the sometimes short-term, rapid technique of conducting focus groups. Like participant observation, it is often treated as a method in itself and has its own considerable literature. Focus groups provide a way of gathering sometimes complex data rapidly (which we explore in Chapter 6). Those data may be quickly and descriptively reported, as, for example, in short-term market research. (If the focus groups are conducted to gauge reactions to a new product label, the client wants a description of those reactions and will not be pleased by a subtle analysis of the ideological meanings of product labeling.) But focus groups are used in many methods for many different research purposes, some aimed at describing and others theorizing.

Most qualitative research is done with more *interpretive methods* that move “up” from descriptions to theories about processes and experiences discovered. These are for projects aiming to see both “what is going on” and also what it *means*, or how it could be *explained*. Some may use theory from previous studies or literature to guide the perspective, and some construct or contribute new “midrange” theory as an explanatory tool, aiming for insights that would not otherwise be accessible or available if they stopped at description. In very different ways, such a combination of description and interpretation is offered by grounded theory and discourse analysis. Studies using either may draw on existing higher-level theory or may use their own data to discover and build new theory.

Some methods, however, are primarily interpretive. They place much less emphasis on description; rather, they focus on interpretations of the discovered world, what is experienced by those studied, and how their perceptions might be understood. Phenomenology is the classic example, often regarded as a philosophical perspective as well as a social research method. It is used in many disciplines and takes very many forms. Phenomenological research may produce studies full of feeling, reflectively describing meaning, emotions, and experience, pulling and using similar emotional responses from the reader. Their role is to identify the essence of the phenomenon and perhaps to construct and explore concepts. But note, there is description behind these outcomes.

Now, consult your research goal. It will indicate the relative need for description and interpretation. When researchers are thinking about their topic, they usually decide at what level of analysis the main phenomenon of interest *needs* to be accessed. They will usually also have a practical or political agenda, which often is the reason they are doing the research. Thus, in a study to improve patient care, an action research approach might be used to expose problems, an evaluation framework to report performance, and a phenomenological approach to explore the patients' experiences. Each purpose has suggested a different method, which will focus and frame the research differently. Each of these studies may use some form of ethnography, but different data will be gathered and handled differently in the analysis. For instance, what the researcher ignores as "irrelevant" or attends to as pertinent, significant, and interesting differs according to the focus of the research question. And, of course, while all the ethnographies in these examples may be based on the same broad assumptions about culture, they will be differently led by theories and literature used to inform the research, and by the researcher's perspective and stance. These differences within and among methods give each method—and every study—a unique purpose or function and lead to different types of results.

STARTING SIMPLE

We offer this map of methods to assist you in starting out toward your own project with one method. Once you can recognize each method's approach and way of looking, and the sort of study it can produce, you

will be able to locate the approach most appropriate to ask and answer your question and most likely to provide the needed outcome. Once familiar with and able to recognize the different kinds of qualitative research, you will be able to learn more about the appropriate method and, from there, to start designing your project. Locating your project in one method, you can get to know it well and start thinking that way. Remember, all methods have integrity—there is a fit of question, data, and analysis. So in selecting the method that best enables you to achieve your goals and best answers your research question, it is wise to understand the method as a whole. As you read texts and explore real examples of studies using this method, you will discover what your selected method does to data.

Why just one method? Experienced researchers often mix and match approaches from many methods, even melding them into a new research approach. But for a new researcher, it is too easy to create methodological messes, violate assumptions, and create a weakened design and fragmented study that will not answer the question or be publishable. If you are just starting out, we strongly advise that you find the appropriate method for your project and work within it, rather than taking techniques from several.

For novice researchers, we also advise against starting in what is often termed mixed- or multiple-methods design, where studies are built from a combination of segments conducted by different methods. Such designs can be most useful when a single method does not adequately answer the question but may be answered by combining the results of more than one data set in the analysis of one project. But method combinations require very careful research design, and the workload amounts to two (or more!) studies. We strongly recommend, for your first project, that you start simple and small.

The same advice applies to research designs that combine a number of studies on a topic (sometimes termed *metasynthesis*). Here, the researcher “pools” the results from the findings of many studies to compare and contrast, to combine or synthesize the concepts and theory to produce results of great scope or certainty. By examining the similarities and differences, by “smoothing” or merging them into a “mega model,” the findings may move the area forward more quickly than would conducting yet another context-bound study. But the task of bringing multiple studies together can be daunting. (Studies combining multiple projects in these ways are discussed in Chapter 4.)

FIVE METHODS

In the following sections, we sketch each of the five very different qualitative methods already introduced. Each is explored under five headings. What sorts of questions are asked? What is the researcher's stance? What sorts of data are needed? What do the results look like? And, finally, what are some of the different approaches to working in this method?

These sketches aim to help you identify relevant methods to explore for your own work, to find a fit of your question with a method. When that fit is found, follow the suggested reading to get a fuller understanding of the method and its varieties, and to make an informed choice about the approach. A resources section ends each method's sketch, and more resources at the end of the chapter will direct you into the literature. Your goal is to assess methods for their usefulness to your research and, within those methods, assess approaches. Keep assessing, even when the claims for a method or approach are apparently authoritative (or dogmatic)—and especially then.

We return in Chapter 9 to these five methods, to suggest how it would feel to work in each, their different ways of making data, and different analysis strategies.

ETHNOGRAPHY

What Sorts of Questions Are Asked?

Ethnography traditionally involved the researcher, usually an anthropologist, traveling to some “primitive” tribe and asking how they lived and what their culture was like. The goal would be to live with them for several years, thereby learning (and recording) their language and documenting their culture—their kinship system, work patterns, ways of life, beliefs and values—as comprehensively as possible. It is often termed *field research* because the goal is for the researcher to enter the “field” of the setting to be studied and ask what is going on there.

Since that time, the role and function of ethnography has changed considerably: Ethnography is now used far more widely and usually topic focused. Researchers are now using ethnographic methods to explore

smaller *subcultural* units, such as institutions—in particular closed institutions (e.g., prisons, hospitals, and nursing homes)—and to study loosely connected groups of people (e.g., hockey teams or motorcycle gangs), those with particular occupations (e.g., university professors or politicians), and persons with particular characteristics, such as a shared difficulty or illness (e.g., earthquake victims or stroke patients).

An ethnographer may go into a setting with a particular research question or with the more open goal of describing the culture. Davis (1983, 1986/1992), for instance, describes the meaning menopause holds for women of Grey Rock Harbour, “taking into account both the collective and idiosyncratic elements of village life which help explicate the emic perspective of menopause. These include (1) the semantics of menopause, (2) lay semantics and (3) local institutions and the moral order” (Davis, 1986/1992, p. 151). Cassell (1987/1992) used ethnographic methods to explore the work of surgeons, as well as the ethos and “the set of traits distinctive of that profession.” She also examined some of “the dynamics and the personal cost and benefits of maintaining the ethos and the set of traits” (pp. 170–171).

The Researcher’s Stance

The ethnographer is always a “participant observer.” This is a role with its own literature and its own challenges. If you are considering working with ethnography, you must understand the requirements for good participant observation. A useful early indication of the challenge is to try seriously observing, and recording your observations, in a situation where you want to be a genuine participant (Richards, 2009, pp. 40–42).

How much will you expect to participate, and what will be the challenges? Participant observation can vary from a situation in which the researcher is a *complete observer*, outside looking in, to one in which the researcher is a *complete participant*, fully participating in all that is observed. More common are the situations between, where the researcher is *mainly participant* or *mainly observer*. It is important to be “up front” about these roles—especially if you are entering a situation (such as a community or family setting or work environment) in which you could well be expected to assist. What you are told and allowed to see will be affected by the degree of trust and acceptance you achieve, thus affecting the quality of the data and the study itself. Establishing good relationships takes time, so you cannot expect excellent data to be gathered

immediately. Critical to the success of participant observation is the relationship between those observed and the researcher. As the field experience is being negotiated, the researcher must reflect on and negotiate their role with the group whilst obtaining permissions and consents.

Traditionally, ethnographic research explores phenomena within cultural contexts from the *emic* perspective—that is, from the perspective of the members of the cultural groups involved. The perspective used in data analysis is from the participants themselves. Compare this with the *etic* perspective, or the perspective of the outsider/researcher, which is usually the perspective used in quantitative inquiry. But there is always a tension between these perspectives. Because cultural assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors are embedded within a cultural group, they are not always evident to those who are a part of the group. If a researcher shares the participants' culture (so can take the *emic*, or insider, perspective), they will find it difficult to “see” the beliefs, values, practices, and behaviors embedded in everyday life. The research will be easier, and the differences more evident, if the researcher is an outsider to both of the cultures being compared and contrasted.

Ethnography is always conducted in the natural setting, or the *field*, so that the researcher can study the lives of members of the cultural group directly, in their everyday setting. Ethnographers work to become participants, as integrated as possible into the lives of the people they are studying. Recall that the researcher's stance is outside the group being studied, yet the data collection procedures are designed to elicit *emic* data (i.e., data reflecting the “native” point of view). The researcher is a “student” of the group under study, learning and being taught by, yet not truly one of the group—a role Agar (1996) termed a “professional stranger.”

An ethnography usually has distinct *stages* and *phases*, during which different types of data are collected and the researcher's effectiveness as an analyst varies (Morse & Field, 1995, pp. 71–73). The *first phase* is “getting in,” during which the researcher is a stranger to the setting and the primary task is *negotiating entry*, finding a role and fitting in. The researcher feels awkward and self-conscious. Wax (1971) notes that one should not become an ethnographer unless one can tolerate feeling “out of place” and “making a fool of one's self” (p. 370). Usually, during this phase the researcher does not understand the setting or the participants, so interpretation is premature. Thus, data making at this stage should focus on relatively concrete tasks, such as making maps of the setting or becoming acquainted with who's who in the community under study. The researcher keeps a diary of initial impressions and uses field notes to record observations.

During the *second phase*, the researcher becomes better acquainted with the routines in the setting, and the participants become more comfortable with the researcher. Data making now consists of nonparticipant observations and informal conversations. Key informants are identified, and initial participants are selected and perhaps interviewed. With acceptance into the setting come initial analytic hunches about the situation studied.

Trust has developed between the participants and the researcher by the *third phase*, which is marked by *cooperation and acceptance*. Data making is most productive in this phase. The researcher now understands what is happening in the setting, and the data become more focused; the researcher also uses the data to verify hunches and to develop theoretical formulations.

At the end of the third phase, the researcher may feel relaxed and integrated into the setting, to the extent of becoming acculturated. This may introduce a problem if they identify more with the cultural norms of the group than with their own research agenda, losing objectivity in conducting observations and analysis. The *fourth phase* is, therefore, one of *withdrawal*. The research focus at this stage is primarily on data analysis, with any further data collection focused on gathering data to resolve ambiguities, fill in thin areas, and verify previous data. The task of the *last phase* is analysis; the research is completed and the ethnography written.

Awareness of self during data collection is vital. Crucial to good ethnography is the researcher's awareness of his or her own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and the way they influence what data are collected. The researcher must also be aware of roles and relationships with others in the field, what data are collected, and why, and must record all these self-observations in a research diary. A good research diary can have a profound impact on how the researcher moves through the process of making sense of the data, affecting whether they see the obvious and the less obvious. Relationships established between the researcher and those in the field, the development of trust, and the degree of the researcher's inclusion as a member of the group—all these factors have some influence on the type and quality of data that are collected and available for analysis.

What Sorts of Data Are Needed?

Ethnography provides many strategies for obtaining data that will enable the researcher to describe cultural norms, perspectives, characteristics, behavior, and patterns. But within this variety, the primary data of ethnographic studies will always be *field notes* and other documentary or

visual records of what is seen and experienced or learned by observation or through conversation. Good field researchers take very thorough and detailed field notes and also keep a diary, recording not only the detail of what is discovered but also the researcher's experience and responses.

Data are not usually of a single type. The research purpose and question dictate the types and forms of data collected. *Observational data* (recorded as field notes or in the form of photographs, video recordings, and so forth) may be supplemented by *interviews* (recorded as field notes or audio recorded and transcribed), the researcher's ongoing theoretical notes in a *diary*, plus historical records or other documentary data that may be relevant. In turn, these data may take various forms. For instance, interviews may be unstructured, semistructured, or structured; they may include questionnaires, surveys, or special techniques such as sentence frames and card sorts to elicit particular kinds of responses that fall within the parameters of whatever is being studied. Quantitative data may also be included.

When an ethnographic researcher is gathering data, the fact that culture is shared among all group members theoretically means that any member of the group may serve as a participant in the study. However, the researcher must consider the characteristics of *good informants* (i.e., having the ability to reflect on and describe the culture, being articulate and patient) and the type of data required. Participants who work most closely with and interpret the culture for the researcher are known as *key informants*. They serve to inform and instruct the researcher about the culture, although the researcher compiles these data and may verify them with data from other participants. During data collection and analysis, the researcher must consistently reflect on the results in the context of the cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors of the group being studied.

Where ethnography is used in more limited settings, in organizations or social groups where much of the information sought is documented, the ethnographer seeks and sorts this information, learning from the differences, for example, between formal accounts of institutional rules and observation of what in fact goes on.

What Do the Results Look Like?

The main goal of most ethnographic research is what has been classically termed *thick description* (Geertz, 1973): an account that describes richly and in detail all features of the culture.

Cognitive ethnography (Spradley, 1979) may include presenting data as *taxonomies* or *classification systems*, whose function is to identify objects that are culturally significant, but implicit in the culture, and to display the relationships among them, thus creating a framework for unique insights into the culture. A taxonomy permits the researcher to display classes of objects according to common characteristics as well as the sub-categories of related objects within a particular class, but it does not account for processes.

Ethnography, perhaps more than any of the other methods sketched here, has undergone major changes in recent years. You will find that the literature contains a lively debate about the rival goals of description and theorizing. The results may look like theoretical monographs or like documentary films and articles on some aspect of daily life (e.g., eating, dance, health beliefs), special circumstances (e.g., childbirth, funeral ceremonies), or representation (e.g., use of media such as art, drama, dance).

Different Approaches Within Ethnography

Ethnography may take several forms, depending on the type of research question, its scope, and the researcher's perspective or location.

Focused ethnography is a term created to deal with departures from the traditional image of ethnography. "Only long-term field studies, it seems, epitomise what may rightly be called ethnography. With this ideal derived from anthropology, many of the ethnographies done in sociology and other fields frequently appear to fall short or to be 'deficient'" (Knoblauch, 2005). It recognizes the increasing trend for ethnography to be used where, as Muecke (1994) notes, the topic is specific and may be identified before the researcher commences the study. Focused ethnography might be conducted with a subcultural group rather than with a cultural group completely different from that of the researcher. It may also be used to study *institutions*, focusing on how the lives of those in institutions are "embedded in social relations, both those of ruling and economy" (Smith, 2005, p. 31). For example, Gubrium (1975) studied a nursing home, and Germain (1979) studied a cancer ward. Ethnographic studies may focus on groups of participants who share some feature or features, such as a particular disability. In such studies, participants may not know one another, but the researcher focuses on their common behaviors and experiences resulting from their shared features, such as being treated the same way by care providers. This enables the researcher to apply the

assumptions from a shared culture. In focused ethnography, data making may include only some of the strategies that define ethnography. For instance, fieldwork may be less important than interviews.

Autoethnography is, as the name suggests, ethnography of the researcher's own experience. Rather than study "others," these writers analyze personal narratives in the light of sociological literature (see Ellis & Bochner, 1996, 2000). The field raises complex questions of the researcher's role and reflexivity. Autoethnography uses the methods of ethnography, but with very different purposes and results. The researcher records and writes narrative, reflects and makes field notes, and may use a diary and other forms of documentation to refresh their recollection of the event and add details. But the researcher is also the subject, and the purpose is usually to research experiences they consider unique, important, and unforgettable. They are usually "milestone" events that have significance for their own lives—uncommon, extraordinary events. Autoethnographers sometimes feel that the sharing of and reflections on their own experiences will somehow assist others, make them feel less alone or in the same despair they felt, or will support and encourage them. Sharing their experiences will enable others to seek therapy, to persevere, or at least to understand what has happened to them and that they are not alone.

Critical ethnography emerged, with broader "critical theory," in the 1960s and '70s, challenging established social values and power relations. Feminist and postmodern approaches insisted on "ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived* domain" (Madison, 2005, p. 5). Thomas (1993) gives a wide definition: "Critical ethnographers describe, analyze, and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress, and constrain. Critical scholarship requires that commonsense assumptions be questioned" (pp. 2–3). Critical ethnography assumes that the researcher cannot be value-free and should direct efforts toward positive social change (Carspecken, 1996, p. 3). Criticism of fieldwork conducted mainly by male anthropologists was extended to the ethnographic methods themselves, from the focus of the research question to data collection and the presentation of the results, revealing how the contribution of women had been silenced by omission.

Participatory action research (PAR) follows the ethnographic methods of conducting field research using strategies of interviews and observations, but it challenges the researcher–participant relationship. Rather than

conducting research *on* people, practitioners of PAR conduct research *with* the people being studied (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). They believe that such *cooperative inquiry* is less likely to “undermine the self-determination of their participants” (p. 4). Participants discuss and agree on what they want to research, the nature of the questions, modes of data collection and analysis, the way data are written up, and how the findings are distributed.

Action research (AR) is research also conducted by a team of professional action researchers and stakeholders—members of the organization or community being studied—with the goal of *seeking to improve their situation*. As in PAR, they jointly define the research problem, cogenerate relevant background knowledge, identify and learn research methods, and interpret and implement the findings. Thus, “AR democratizes the relationship between the professional researcher and the local interested parties” (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 4).

Film, and now primarily video, has been an important medium for ethnography since Bates and Mead (1942) used film to document fieldwork. In *visual ethnography*, video or film is used to record the scene, the daily lives of participants, interviews, and those events that cannot accurately (or with detail) be stored as field notes. Researchers may use video recording in two ways: to record, catalog, and gather data to supplement participant observation or as a stand-alone strategy for interpretation (for example, researchers may manipulate video recorded data, slowing down or speeding up the recording, to explore interactions or nonverbal gestures in microanalytic detail). In addition, video enables researchers to examine dialogue, along with its accompanying gestures, in detail (see Goldman-Segall, 1998).

GROUNDED THEORY

What Sorts of Questions Are Asked?

Grounded theory has its origins in symbolic interactionism, taking the perspective that reality is negotiated between people, always changing, and constantly evolving (Blumer, 1969/1986). Research questions in grounded theory are about process and change over time, and the methods of making and analyzing data reflect a commitment to understanding

the ways in which reality is socially constructed. The assumption is that through detailed exploration, with theoretical sensitivity, the researcher can construct theory *grounded in data*.

Grounded theory studies usually begin with questions about “what’s going on here.” This is an appropriate method for the researcher wishing to learn *from* the participants how to understand a process or a situation. The questions themselves suggest the examination of a process. Thus, grounded theory studies are usually situated in experiences in which change is expected, and the method has become dominant in research areas where the understanding of change and process is central, such as in health and business studies. For instance, Lorencz (1988/1992) explored the experiences of predischARGE schizophrenics with at least 2 years of illness. Morse and Bottorff (1988/1992) studied mothers who were breast feeding to find attitudes to breast milk expression. Turner (1994) gives a detailed account of his techniques for discovery of a grounded theory in his description of the organizational processes that led to a ferry disaster.

The method was originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), with equal attribution; as we show below, the idea of theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978) and the techniques for creating theory grounded in data (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were developed separately by the two authors. In their works, Glaser and Strauss presented researchers with what at the time was a radical proposal—that theory should be developed “in intimate relationship with data, with researchers fully aware of themselves as instruments for developing that grounded theory” (Strauss, 1987, p. 6).

Such theory will usually be small-scale, midrange, and focused, and techniques will emphasize the “continuous interplay between analysis and data collection” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 273) until a theory fitting the data is created. The process involves a data-driven design (theoretical sampling). The key goal is the creation of new theoretical concepts *from* the data and the seeking of *core concepts* (Strauss, 1987), or the pursuit of what Glaser (1978) terms the *basic social process* or the *basic social psychological process*.

The Researcher’s Stance

The concept of *theoretical sensitivity* is crucial in grounded theory. The researcher *seeks* theory, constantly working with data records and

records of ideas to tease from them the concepts and the linkages that might generate theoretical insight. Those emerging concepts are also in constant interplay with the data as the researcher seeks integration and synthesis.

The perspective that reality is constantly changing and being negotiated leads the researcher to active inquiry into the event over time. There is an emphasis on detailed knowledge, constant comparison, and the trajectory of the event. The researcher consistently asks not only “What is going on here?” but “How is it different?” The method of grounded theory promotes a stance of refusal to accept a report at face value, a sort of methodological restlessness that leads the researcher to seek characteristics, conditions, causes, antecedents, and consequences of events or responses as ways of drawing them together in an integrated theory.

What Sorts of Data Are Needed?

Grounded theory research does not require any particular data source, but it does require data within which theory can be grounded. The goal of discovering theory from data sets high standards for the data, both in depth of detail and in coverage of process. However the data are made, the records must support the probing and friction of constant comparison and reflection. A study may commence with an observational phase in the field or with interviews—narratives about the event, told sequentially from beginning to end. Such interviews are much more able to support the method than are semistructured interviews or brief accounts.

Researchers should beware of attempting grounded theory research with structured data records, which preemptively limit what they will hear in response to their preconceived questions. In such data, it is difficult to identify the process or discover categories derived from the meanings held by others.

What Do the Results Look Like?

Grounded theory is undoubtedly the label most popularly applied to qualitative research, and undoubtedly the most misapplied, often being taken as synonymous with *qualitative* (Lee & Fielding, 1996). We share a concern that researchers should understand the true nature of grounded

theory; it is a unique and highly demanding method, with strong congruence. If you don't know what method you are using, it is highly unlikely to be grounded theory.

The explicit goal of grounded theory studies is to develop theory. So reports will feature theory that is limited and *local*—theory derived from, and grounded in, the data. A study using grounded theory will usually have a single story line, offering a core concept and its attendant theory as a way of making sense of the data. These are *new* theoretical offerings, not seen before that particular study because they are the product of it. Often, the core concepts are also new, not everyday, concepts.

A grounded theory study is densely argued; the researcher identifies the concepts involved and develops theory by exploring the relationships between these concepts in the stages or phases of the process and the core category or variable (or *basic social process*). This one category is the theme that runs through the data and accounts for most of the variance. A grounded theory study attempts to account for the centrality of the core concept by telling the story of its emergence. Reports may include diagrams of the process, or summary typologies, indicating the presence or absence of selected factors.

Different Approaches Within Grounded Theory

The founders of grounded theory came from contrasting backgrounds and worked as co-investigators on high-profile projects. For two decades, based on the original work of Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory was presented as a coherent and complete method—but as one method. Over the next two decades, as each author worked independently, the method evolved and diverged, with Glaser (1978) and Strauss (1987) separately writing significant and very different methodological texts. At that time, most researchers using the techniques assumed there was a single set of methodological procedures for grounded theory research.

Divisions between Glaser and Strauss appeared in the early 1990s with a publication by Glaser (1992) in which he rejected Strauss's book coauthored with Corbin (1990). Instead of generating a methodological debate, this created in some locations two "schools" of grounded theory, termed *Glaserian* and *Straussian* grounded theory (Stern, 1994, p. 219). Researchers in these areas are increasingly (and, arguably, regrettably) expected to choose between two distinct sets of procedures, using as

their primary source either Glaser's (1978) or Strauss's (1987) text, which was in turn developed and, arguably, greatly changed in joint publication by Strauss and Corbin (1994, 1998) and after Strauss's death (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

All methods evolve, and should do so. Below we outline four variants. We share a hope that the various strands of grounded theory will be used to fit projects as appropriate, and we encourage you to explore and, if appropriate, draw on both these groups of techniques. But you should be aware that the following distinctions are commonly made.

-  **Glaserian grounded theory:** Glaserian grounded theory takes the more objectivist perspective: Data are both separate and distant from both the participants and the analyst (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser focuses his attention *on* the data to allow the data to tell their own story (Stern, 2009; Stern & Porr, 2011). The Glaserian analyst attends to the data and asks, "What do we have here?" (Stern, 1994, p. 220). As in the original documents on grounded theory, analysis focuses on components of the theory—on the processes, categories, dimensions, and properties—and the development of, and interaction between, these components allows the theory to emerge. In Glaserian approaches, the theory is more often diagrammed to illustrate the relationships between concepts and categories.

-  **Straussian grounded theory:** Straussian grounded theorists examine the data and stop at each word or phrase to ask, "What if?" Thus, the analyst "brings to bear every possible contingency that could relate to the data, whether it appears in the data or not" (Stern, 1994, p. 220). Straussian grounded theorists are concerned with striving to rise above the data to develop more abstract concepts and their descriptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Theories are created in interaction with the data and (as in Glaserian approaches) retain the emphasis on categories, dimensions, and properties. There is a strong emphasis on "open coding," best exemplified in the recorded research conversations in Strauss's (1987) book. Theories are the product of reflection, discussion, and detailed examination of text, constructed from memos and dense coding (Corbin, 2009). Straussian researchers rely less on diagrams than do Glaserian grounded theorists.

- Dimensional analysis:*** A third early version of grounded theory (and one very different from the other two) is dimensional analysis, developed by Schatzman (1991), a colleague of Glaser and Strauss. Dimensional analysis allows for the “explicit articulation of the analytic process” and provides “an overarching structure to guide analysis” (Kools, McCarthy, Durham, & Robrecht, 1996, p. 314). Based on comparative analysis, dimensional analysis was presented as providing a fuller approach to social life than could grounded theory (Bowers & Schatzman, 2009).

- Constructivist grounded theory:*** In contrast to the Glaserian method and Strauss and Corbin’s “objectivist” method, constructivist grounded theory is presented as more interpretive—both the data and the analysis are created from shared experiences and relationships with participants.

Constructivist inquiry starts with the experience and asks how members [i.e., participants] construct it. To the best of their ability, constructivists enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints. Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 187)

- Situational analysis:*** Recently developed by Adele Clarke (2005, 2009), situational analysis focuses on the situation—context and people, and their relations, actions, and interactions. It uses interview, observational, and other sources. Situational analysis “allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment—to analyze complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii). Thus, it differs dramatically from process-oriented grounded theory in that the theory is not constructed around a basic social process. Rather, it is organized by a situation-centered framework developed by Anselm Strauss, using three types of mapping data, to organize “key elements, materialities, discourses, structures, and conditions that characterize the situation of the inquiry” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii). In this way, “the *situation becomes the unit of analysis*, and understanding its elements and their relations is the primary goal” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxii; italics in original). More closely aligned with ethnography than is traditional

grounded theory, it enables the analysis of “highly complex situations of actions and positionality, of heterogeneous discourses . . . and situated knowledges and positionality, of the heterogenous discourses . . . and of the situated knowledges of life itself” (Clarke, 2005, p. xxiii).

We urge you to discover the differences in these approaches and evaluate their significance, avoiding the abyss created by claims that there is only one way to achieve grounded theory. Such claims ossify methods and prevent researchers from modifying recommended procedures or developing new ways of combining them. Our advice is that you return to the earlier works of the founders and note the tone of those writings. Strauss wrote in 1987 that the methods he describes “are by no means to be regarded as hard and fixed rules for converting data into effective theory” (p. 7). Rigid rules, after all, are particularly inimical to grounded theory approaches.

Researchers need to be alert not only to the constraints and challenges of research settings and research aims but to the nature of their data. They must also be aware of the temporal aspects or phasing of their researches, the open-ended character of the “best research” in any discipline, the immense significance of their own experiences as researchers, and the local contexts in which the researches are conducted (Strauss, 1987, pp. 7–8).

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is an important philosophical movement of the 20th century. Founded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), it is used to refer to both a philosophy and a research approach. As a method, it has undergone many shifts in orientations and approaches.

Here we describe the *hermeneutical phenomenology*, as a method. From this perspective, phenomenology offers a descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaging mode of inquiry from which the essence of an experience may be elicited. Experience is considered to be an individual’s perceptions of his or her presence in the world at the moment when things, truths, or values are constituted (van Manen, 1990).

Four existentialisms guide phenomenological reflection: *temporality* (lived time), *spatiality* (lived space), *corporeality* (lived body), and *relationality* or *communality* (lived human relation) (van Manen, 1990). People are considered to be tied to their worlds—embodied—and are understandable only in their contexts. Existence in this sense is meaningful (*being in the world*), and the focus is on the lived experience. Human behavior occurs in the context of relationships to things, people, events, and situations.

Two major assumptions underlie phenomenology. The first is that perceptions present us with evidence of the world—not as it is thought to be but as it is lived. The lived world, or the *lived experience*, is critical to phenomenology. The second assumption is that human existence is meaningful and of interest in the sense that we are always conscious of something. Existence as *being in the world* is a phenomenological phrase acknowledging that people are in their worlds and are understandable only in their contexts. Human behavior occurs in the context of the four existentialisms introduced above: relationships to things, people, events, and situations.

What Sorts of Questions Are Asked?

Phenomenological inquiry may not be formalized as a question per se. The researcher may have an interest targeted toward simply understanding the meaning of the lived experience in a particular phenomenon, with questions arising as inquiry proceeds. Therefore, these questions are what sensitize inquiry in the study. For instance, in considering his experiences as a parent of a child undergoing a heart transplant, Smith (1989/1992) describes his frustration with the delays in obtaining postoperative analgesic for his child:

The interviewer does not simply ask a question of whose interests are being served—the parents' or the child's? But rather, he asks, how can a medical decision be made in presumably the best interests of the child by ignoring those of us who have been responsible by now for the welfare of the child? If we, the parents of a particular child, want to remain close to our child, what might we be up against when a crucial medical decision is made as to what should be done for our child? What sort of logic would deny fundamental responsibility we feel for our child? (p. 106)

In published reports, the research questions are often embedded in the introductory remarks that set the context of the study. For instance, Kelpin (1984/1992), in her study of birthing pain, notes that the pain of childbirth has a particular “centrality” for women’s relationships as mothers and as human beings. The way Kelpin considers her research topic provides us with an excellent example of the way phenomenologists consider their research questions:

What do the pains of birth tell us about ourselves, about our sufferings and our joys? Is there something in the pangs of childbirth which holds true for all women: those who pleasure and ride above the pain? Those who endure it? And those who suffer? Some birthings are short and intense, some are long and exhausting, and some in need of medical intervention and treatment with forceps, medication and Caesarian delivery. Is it possible that viewing pain-as-lived may reveal sublimity and joy as well as the agony, the hurtfulness of the pain of childbirth? Our immediate appraisal of pain-as-experienced may bring light to inner meanings that go beyond theoretical and practical approaches. By coming to an understanding of the pain as experienced by women we may be able to come to grips with the significance or essence of the pain. (pp. 93–94; reprinted with permission from the University of Alberta and SAGE)

Van Manen (1990) notes that stating a question directly often simplifies the problem, so in phenomenology, the actual research question may be left implicit. Clarke (1990/1992), for instance, explores her child’s experience of asthma in light of her own reflections on her child’s experience. She does not state the question explicitly but introduces it in the phenomenological way, using voices of her daughter’s essay (“Memories of Breathing”), voices of poets as illustrators, and voices from the phenomenological literature, while her own voice guides our insights into the experience.

The Researcher’s Stance

When thinking phenomenologically, the researcher attempts to understand, or grasp, the essence of how people attend to the world (using the four existentialisms), remembering that a person’s description

is a *perception*, a form of interpretation (Boyd, 1993; van Manen, 1990). Every day, we consciously experience concrete objects through intuition. Giorgi (1997), on the other hand, notes that *presences* are the experience of many phenomena that are not “realistic” but are vital to the understanding of the lived experience. These are such things as dreams and delusions. *Intentionality* is the essential feature of consciousness. Consciousness is always “directed to an object that is not in itself conscious, although it could be, as in reflected acts” (p. 236).

What Sorts of Data Are Needed?

Phenomenological researchers aim to *bracket* all a priori knowledge about the topic; by writing their assumptions, knowledge, and expectations, they hope to enter the conversation with no presuppositions. These early writings are themselves data. They most frequently gather new data by using audio recorded “conversations” without predetermined questions, following a “clue-and-clue-taking process” as the conversations proceed (Ray, 1994, p. 129). They then transcribe these recorded conversations and use them as a basis for reflection. During analysis, phenomenologists also reflect on personal experiences, observations, and the experiences of others—even those expressed in poetry, literature, and film.

What Do the Results Look Like?

Phenomenology gives us insights into the meanings or the essences of experiences we may previously have been unaware of but can recognize. This experience of confirmation is known as the *phenomenological nod*. The essence may be presented in an essay as several segments or perspectives, each describing a different dimension of the experience. Phenomenological researchers may share the results of their studies in essays or in book-length works.

Different Approaches Within Phenomenology

All phenomenologists subscribe to the belief that being human is a unique way of being, in that human experiences and actions follow from

their self-interpretation (Benner, 1994, p. ix). But phenomenological methods have evolved in more than one direction and take several forms that have some commonalities. Van Manen (2011) has classified the following orientations:

-  **Transcendental phenomenology** (Husserl and his collaborators: Eugen Fink, Tymieniecka, Van Breda, and Giorgi): This interpretation is presuppositionless and based on “intentionality” (“all conscious awarenesses are intentional awarenesses”) and “eidetic reduction” (vivid and detailed attentiveness to description). Transcendental phenomenology explores the way knowledge comes into being, and knowledge is based on insights rather than objective characteristics, which “constitutes meaning.”
-  **Existential phenomenology** (Heidegger, Sartre, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Marcel, and others): According to this perspective, the observer cannot separate him-/herself from the lived world. “Being-in-the-world” is reality as it is perceived, and a reciprocal relationship exists between the observer and the phenomenon that includes all thoughts, moods, efforts, and actions within the life-world that is man situated. Pre-reflected experiences, the life-world, and phenomena constitute *existence*, or human reality.
-  **Hermeneutical phenomenology** (Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, and van Manen): In this orientation, knowledge comes into being through language and understanding. Understanding and interpretation are intertwined, and interpretation is an evolving process. Hermeneutic phenomenologists use culture (symbols, myth, religion, art, and language), poetry, and art in their interpretations. Van Manen’s (1990) method starts with the exploration of a pedagogically grounded concept within the everyday lived experience. Through processes of reflection, writing and rewriting, and thematic analysis, the researcher may describe and interpret the essence or meaning of the lived experience.
-  **Linguistical phenomenology** (Blanchot, Derrida, and Foucault): This orientation takes the perspective that language and discourse reveal the relations between “understanding, culture, historicity, identity, and human life.” Meaning “resides in language and the text, rather than in the subject, in consciousness, or even in lived experience.”

Researchers use *heuristic phenomenology* (Moustakas, 1994) when they seek to understand themselves and their lived worlds. Although such research is autobiographical, the questions it answers may have social, and even universal, significance. Heuristic research “unfolds” through initial engagement, immersion into the topic and the question, incubation, explication, and culmination of the research in “creative synthesis” (Moustakas, 1990).

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Briefly, discourse analysis is the study of “language in use”—not just the study of language to say things but to “do things. People use language to communicate, co-operate, help others, and build things like marriages, reputations, and institutions. They also use it to lie, advantage themselves, to harm people, and destroy things like marriages, reputations, and institutions” (Gee, 2011, p. ix).

At first glance, there could hardly be greater contrast than that between phenomenology and discourse analysis. They seem to represent the extremes of interpretive flight and disciplined description. Where the phenomenological researcher is positing meanings and essences of a phenomenon, the discourse analyst is intent on interpreting what is said and written.

But there is a strong link between this method and the others considered so far. All are based in the conviction that social reality is socially constructed. The ethnographer watches that reality unfold, the grounded theorist examines the processes of acceptance or challenge, and the phenomenologist directs attention to the meanings “reality” gives to our lives and their parts.

For the discourse analyst, the focus is on speech and written communication. Speech includes the speaker’s nonverbal cues (such as gaze, gesture, and action), the listener, and relevant context. By examining these, we can, it is argued, gain insight into the social construction of our lives.

What Sorts of Questions Are Asked?

The questions asked by all sorts of discourse analysis concern the meanings and implications of words spoken or recorded, and how the

taken-for-granted messages behind these words have social implications. But different approaches will pursue these questions in different ways and, thus, have different emphases on interpretation and description.

Phillips and Hardy (2002, pp. 34–38) provide a useful tabulation of selected examples of studies. They include studies from political, business, organizational, media, and cultural enquiries, which have tackled small and huge questions. In a later chapter, they outline in detail how they framed the research question in their own study of refugee politics. “In this study, we examined the way in which organizations used power to discursively shape the conceptualization of a refugee in ways that protected their interests” (p. 61).

For some discourse analysts, the questions cover wide enquiry about discourse as a creator and reflector of social reality. “Whereas other qualitative methodologies work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis endeavors to uncover the way in which it is produced” (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 6). Discourse for these researchers is “an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being” (p. 3). Importantly, the questions may come from the texts. Crawford (1995, p. 126), in her analysis of a talk show discussion of date rape, offers an extended example of questions raised by texts, using the show transcripts and researcher’s reflections on them.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, such questions are tackled also by the method of conversation analysis. The contrast is so sharp that you will find conversation analysis sometimes discussed as a separate method. Discourse analysis is interpretive, focuses on language use, prepares the text differently, uses different analytic methods, and answers different types of questions than does conversation analysis (Morse considers them to be different). On the other hand, because its focus is on analysis of speech and texts, Richards sees conversation analysis as a variant of discourse analysis, considering the main aim of conversation analysis to be elucidating the structures of talk. Here the questions may be about repetitions, hesitations, or turn taking in conversation. “They study talk because they want to know about talk” (Cameron, 2001, p. 1).

The questions asked, not surprisingly, vary widely. Discourse may be studied to elicit differences in gendered experience (see Wodak, 1997) or the ways one political approach is made to seem “natural.” Or, for the conversation analysis, the recording of speech enables talk and interaction to be explored “at a site where intersubjective understanding about the participants’ intentions is created and maintained. It therefore gives

access to the construction of meaning in real time" (Peråkylå, 2004, p. 168). The questions asked are detailed, about "the architecture of interaction, and the attendant expectations" (Wooffitt, 2005, p. 7).

The Researcher's Stance

Since the emphasis is on discourse as part of the social construction of everyday life, it is not surprising to find that discourse analysis strongly argues for "reflexivity." This is a demand common across qualitative methods, where attention is increasingly paid to the researchers' ability to reflect on and acknowledge their place in and impact on what is studied. Discourse analysts argue that their methodology unusually directs researchers, who are investigating their own social worlds and languages, to reflect on their part in what is studied, their selection of the voices to be heard, and their ability to challenge or question the texts studied. Phillips and Hardy (2002, p. 85) provide a table of aspects of reflexivity.

A strong tradition in discourse analysis is "critical"; here the researcher stands in defiance against taken-for-granted assumptions and justifications.

What Sorts of Data Are Needed?

Usually, the discourse analyst will examine many episodes of texts or talk and their interrelationships. Transcription is required and is usually "broad" (that is, accurate text including expressions such as "laughs, or coughs" and pauses, and line numbers). This type of transcription may be contrasted with narrow transcription conventions used in conversation analysis (see Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000, p. 58). There is usually also a preference to use bodies of text, "because it is the interrelations between texts, changes in texts, new textual forms, and new systems of distributing texts that constitute a discourse over time" (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 5). Depending on the research question, these data are supplemented with data about the society and current context.

Conversation analysis has a different, "data-centered" emphasis. Sampling of texts is done carefully to represent aspects of the problem studied (see Titscher et al., 2000, p. 58). Because all accounts of the situation are problematized by the method, there is "a principled reluctance to draw on ethnographic characterizations of the setting and its

participants in the analysis” (Wooffitt, 2005, p. 63). Focus on the text means that other “external” issues such as power or gender relations become relevant only if made so by that text. Moreover, issues about the text may become the entire focus of the study, as the researcher observes turn taking or hesitations.

What Do the Results Look Like?

Such studies always surprise. The goal of the discourse analyst is to get behind taken-for-granted meanings of language or text. So reports will challenge assumptions, deconstruct apparently straightforward accounts, and display hidden meanings. For a reader unfamiliar with such research, articles in discourse analysis are often startling. Taking a few passages of text, these methods expand analysis to sometimes extraordinary complexity, since any particular phrase or repetition may lead to a reflection on its significance. Thus, most studies start very focused, on a text or a conversation, and work in great detail through its parts and possibilities. From the minutiae of conversation, they move to often high-level social or political claims.

Different Approaches Within Discourse Analysis

There are many forms of discourse analysis, the main one being critical discourse analysis. *Critical discourse analysis* (Fairclough, 2010) focuses on power and “hidden agendas,” on what is “*wrong* with a society (institution, an organization, etc.) and how the ‘wrongs’ might be ‘righted’ or mitigated, for a particular normative standpoint” (p. 7). Fairclough emphasizes that this approach is more than the analysis of discourse but “some form of systematic transdisciplinary analysis of relations between discourse and other elements of the social process” (p. 10).

CASE STUDY METHOD

We have sketched four very different qualitative methods, each challenging for the newcomer. These ways of approaching social questions are not immediately familiar. Each has its origin in a wider theoretical tradition.

Each has its own fit of question, data, and outcome, and to achieve that fit, the researcher will have to learn a new way of thinking about reality and new skills to design and conduct research.

By contrast, our fifth method, case studies, seems much more approachable. Everyone knows what a case study is; descriptions of “case studies” adorn website marketing and brochures for products from investment portfolios to governmental programs. These case studies offer cheery thumbnail sketches of the (always positive) experience of a small number of people who have used the product or tried the program, usually studded with quotations of their own enthusiastic words. As a quick way to a deadline, this sounds easy. But be warned: As for all qualitative research, what works for the marketing manager can spell disaster for the PhD student!

In the introduction to his classic text, Yin (2009) comments that “using case studies for research purposes remains one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors” (p. 3). Why should this be so?

What Sorts of Questions Are Asked?

Case study is usually seen as a study of a particular social unit or system. Most writers emphasize that a case is “bounded” and studied in its natural setting as a whole. Usually, the larger question is to understand the wider social phenomenon of which it is a case. Stake (1995) explains,

Custom has it that not everything is a case. A child may be a case. A teacher may be a case. But her teaching lacks the specificity, the boundedness, to be called a case. An innovative program may be a case. All the schools in Sweden can be a case. But a relationship among schools, the reasons for innovative teaching, or the policies of school reform are less commonly considered a case. These topics are generalities rather than specifics. The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing. (p. 2)

This is a method, then, that seeks understanding of a social situation or process by focusing on how it is played out in one or more cases. In other words, the cases studied are always cases *of* something. The researcher has started with a question and moved to locating it in a microcosm, one or a few bounded cases.

The Researcher's Stance

Case studies have long been used in social research, traditionally by researchers wishing to give voice to less-prominent social groups or types. The relevant tradition in British sociology is “community studies,” and in the United States, the work of the Chicago School, picturing the lives and contexts of slum neighborhoods and their occupants.

“Case study *method*” is a more recent arrival—and still a highly controversial one—with very different meanings across disciplines. You will find some collections of case studies designed simply to assist a reader in gaining a vivid picture of examples of an innovation or sites of a problem, whereas others aim more at meta-analysis (see Chapter 4), bringing together conclusions from many research sites.

Almost always, there is a commitment to qualitative techniques, to methods seeking to understand how those under study experience their world. In some texts, including Yin's (2009), case study method is treated as the alternative to experiment, survey, archival, or historical analysis; here “case study” appears sometimes to encompass any qualitative research. In others, a “case study” is a particular way of pursuing qualitative inquiry, distinguished from other qualitative research by its own design rules (for two recent examples, see Swanborn, 2010, and Thomas, 2011; see also the collection edited by Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000). Many authors, particularly in educational and business studies, write “with some sense of advocacy” (Stake, 1995, p. xii)—not for those they are studying but for the method itself, promoting case studies as the most desirable and convincing way of conducting and presenting research.

What Sorts of Data Are Needed?

Case study research, ideally, will need detailed data on that case, thoroughly analyzed, to provide “a rich picture—with boundaries” (Thomas, 2011, p. 21). The goal is to understand the case or cases as completely as possible. Most case study texts offer the full palette of qualitative data-making methods, with a particular emphasis on field research by participant observation and interviewing. Some include, and a few emphasize, quantitative methods.

So case study research is unlike the other methods sketched in this chapter in that it is defined by the location and focus of the study, not by

an intellectual and methodological tradition. It may use methods from many traditions. Stake (1995) says his view of case studies “draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological and biographic research methods” (p. xi).

Studies are conducted within a limited geographical scope (in a single institution, unit, family, village), are located within a single program or incident, or may even be bounded by a single person’s experience. The researcher gathers in-depth data, focusing on the particular problem and analyzing all data obtained from that particular case in context, within the identified boundaries.

What Do the Results Look Like?

A good case study is usually a good read. This is because it is focused, offering a powerful representation of the situation or person studied. It may look like a story or a journalistic account, as did the classic studies of the Chicago School vividly conveying city lives and their contexts (Platt, 1992). Or it may look like a thorough dissection of all the factors and forces affecting a program or site. Whatever its presentation, it will offer intensive, detailed descriptions of the case and a sense that the case is thoroughly understood.

It will usually not claim generalization beyond the case or offer external comparison.

The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself. (Stake, 1995, p. 8)

Note that this mode of handling data is very different from the synthesis of grounded theory or ethnography, in which data for each category from each participant are merged and analyzed as a category, separate from the participant. Herein lies the challenge of case study research. The study will stand or fall on the quality of the analysis of one or a few cases. It is all too easy for such a study to become simply richly descriptive.

Different Approaches Within Case Study Method

Given the variety of purposes and approaches, it is not surprising that studies using “case study method” are highly diverse, recommending different procedures, research techniques, and rules. But unlike the other methods discussed in this chapter, there are, as yet, no clearly defined methodological “schools” with their own approaches.

Several texts do offer typologies of case studies. Stake (2005) suggests three types of case studies—not as different approaches to the method but as different research designs for different questions. *Intrinsic* case studies are basically about the case—there is an intrinsic interest in it. *Instrumental* case studies, by comparison, are for a wider purpose, to answer a question through study of a particular case. And *collective* case studies are designed where it is necessary to compare cases, identifying patterns.

For the newcomer, Thomas offers a summary of several typologies of case study research, based on their goals, the researcher’s stance, or their methods, and suggests the ways these can be used to chart an “investigative path” (Thomas, 2011, pp. 91–95).

The uses of case studies vary considerably between disciplines. Go to readings in your research area to find the methodological standards applied.

SUMMARY

We have illustrated methodological congruence with sketches of only five methods. Myriad other methods exist in qualitative research, and more are being proposed at any time.

The appropriate method for your study may not be one of the five discussed here. Working from your research question, you may be led to another qualitative approach, which you will recognize as better able to ask your question or more likely to produce the outcome you seek. When you meet a new method, ask of it the questions we posed above—what questions will it answer, how is the researcher positioned, what data are needed, and how will this study look when finished? Keep looking until you find a fit with your project, and resist pressures to fit the project to a method.

Working this way, from question to method, you will not be tempted to approach qualitative research as though it were done by one generic method. A researcher who does so can get far into a study, even all the way through it, with a result that invites the question, “So what?” That outcome will be descriptive rather than analytic, the researcher going through the motions of identifying a question, conducting interviews, and then sorting data by identifying themes or categories. The report will locate patterns but will rarely produce a theoretical outcome. “Sorted data” as an end result are only as interesting as the data themselves. Such a study may be very interesting, but if conducted without the benefit of a coherent method, it will usually end at this descriptive level.

You will encounter many examples of such work. Our aim is not to condemn descriptive work but, rather, to show how it differs crucially from research within a congruent qualitative method and why such descriptive work is often not regarded as qualitative or accepted for publication in qualitative journals (Morse, 1996). Concerned with the problems of researchers’ attempting to retrofit a congruent qualitative method to data-sorting and pattern-finding tasks, Richards (2000) has labeled such descriptive work “pattern analysis.” In short-term pragmatic studies especially, researchers may have no goals beyond seeking and reporting patterns in data—for example, by demographic variables such as gender or structural factors such as socioeconomic settings of schools studied. If the task is to find out whether the responses to an idea addressed in focus groups vary by gender, or to establish whether the level of acceptance of an initiative in schools is different in lower- and upper-class areas, unstructured data may be necessary and relevant, and analysis may not require abstraction. Often, such studies combine qualitative and quantitative data skillfully and usefully, with the discovery of patterns in the unstructured data illuminating the statistical analysis. If your goal is pattern analysis, many of the techniques discussed in this book may assist you in discovering and reporting patterns. But don’t represent your study as grounded theory.

The lens provided by a method is what enables abstraction from data, the emergence and construction of theory about the data, and the linking of the results to the literature and other theories. In this chapter, we have tried to convey that each method will have a different fit of question to research process and outcome. That fit will set the researcher’s perspective. To do a phenomenological study, you must think as a phenomenologist; to do an ethnography, you must think as

an ethnographer; to discover a grounded theory, you must think as a grounded theorist; and so forth. This is so important that Morse says she has “different tracks” in her brain for thinking in the various ways demanded by individual methods. Within the perspective of each method, the researcher manipulates data by using *analytic techniques*. Although these analytic techniques appear similar for all methods, *how they are used with the data* is what makes a method a particular method. Different methods may use similar techniques, but the individual method’s strategy (the way the techniques are used) gives it a unique application and produces a unique result.

The goal of all qualitative inquiry is not to reproduce reality descriptively but to add insight and understanding and to create theory that provides explanation and even prediction. The best way to gain an appreciation for these differences is to read completed studies that provide examples of the various methods. Ask yourself: How do these studies differ? What contributions do each offer? What level of abstraction or theory development has each reached? Can you begin to identify how each of the authors has obtained abstraction and has, at the same time, come to understand the phenomenon in context?

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