# Qualitative Research *in* Practice

EXAMPLES FOR DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

**Second Edition**

Sharan B. Merriam and Robin S. Grenier

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# Preface

Qualitative research is a powerful tool for learning more about our lives and the sociohistorical context in which we live. The roots of qualitative research can be traced back more than a century to anthropology and sociology, and now qualitative research is embraced by all the social sciences and applied fields of practice. There are numerous journals, web-based resources, conferences, books, and academic courses devoted to this form of inquiry. The variety of topics, journals, and disciplines from which selections for this book were drawn attests to the popularity of qualitative research in fields as diverse as counseling, health, tourism, management, and all levels of education.

The myriad of resources available to novice researchers to learn about qualitative research is both affirming, in that there is help available, and daunting, because there is *so much* help out there. Fortunately, many graduate programs in the social sciences, whether at the masters or doctoral level, include exposure to qualitative research in addition to the usual array of research design and statistics courses. Students are introduced to the philosophical foundations underlying qualitative research, as well as how to design and implement a qualitative study. However, there are still scholars and practitioners in many fields who have had no training in this method but who would like to improve their knowledge of, or have questions about, how their practice can be best approached from a qualitative, rather than quantitative, perspective. Understanding a phenomenon, whether related to one's work, one's family, or one's community, requires accessing participants' perspectives, most often through interviews, observing the phenomenon of interest, and accessing relevant documents or artifacts. This book, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, has been compiled for students and practitioners, who wish to learn more about qualitative research through reading and studying a variety of examples of qualitative research designs and topics.

Before reviewing the contents of this book, we would like to draw attention to two of the book's aspects. First, as this book is about qualitative research, we are working from the assumption that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. It is thus the goal of a qualitative research study to uncover and understand the experience of the phenomenon from the participants' perspectives. Although there are different qualitative designs represented in this collection, all have the discovery and portrayal of participants' perspectives and understandings as their underlying goal. A second feature is that it is not meant to be by itself a textbook on qualitative research; rather, it

is designed for use along with standard texts in the field. It is primarily a collection of articles exemplifying different types of qualitative research. A unique feature of the book is that each article is followed by a short reflection piece by the article's author(s) commenting on some aspect of their experience engaging in this type of research. Some of these reflections are written by novice researchers who describe how they made their way through the study, learning as they went; others are written by more seasoned researchers who have some very insightful things to share about conducting a qualitative study. Readers will be able to resonate with the trial-and-error and discovery nature of doing qualitative research regardless of whether one has had years of experience or is new to the methodology.

This book is intended for all those interested in qualitative research regardless of discipline or experience with this kind of study. Although researchers in fields such as education, nursing, social work, or urban studies may ask different questions of their practice, the *process* of qualitative inquiry remains the same. First, the question needs to be shaped in a manner congruent with the philosophical underpinnings of this form of research; a particular qualitative design is then decided upon, followed by selecting a purposive sample, data collection, and analysis. Finally, the interpretation of the data (the findings) is presented in a format compatible with the particular qualitative design. The introductory chapters of this volume present the "basics" of doing qualitative research, the different types of qualitative inquiry, and how to evaluate and assess studies conducted in this paradigm. Readers can then approach the 16 examples knowing what to look for. We hope this book will be a particularly useful resource for understanding the variety of qualitative research designs and for comparing and contrasting the approaches.

## Overview of Contents

This second edition of *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* reflects both the enduring nature of this form of research, as well as the infusion of new and creative procedures and presentations. Part One presents two updated overview chapters; Part Two offers 16 articles – each exemplifying a particular type of qualitative research – along with the authors' reflections.

Chapter 1, "Introduction to Qualitative Research," explains what qualitative research is and how it differs from more familiar positivist research. This general introduction to qualitative research is followed by a section briefly describing different types of qualitative research designs. The last section of the chapter is a brief overview of the process of conducting a qualitative study.

We retained from the first edition of *Qualitative Research in Practice* the following designs: interpretive (called "basic interpretive" in the first edition), phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry (called "narrative analysis" in the first edition). In a reflection of the dynamic and changing landscape of qualitative research, we have added examples of qualitative research

often loosely categorized as "arts-based," "qualitative action research," and "mixed methods," wherein a substantial component of the methodology is qualitative.

We considered retaining "qualitative case study" from the first edition, but reasoned that a case study, which is an intensive description of a bounded, integrated system (the "case"), was more of a format or structure for focusing an investigation, as well as conveying the findings of an investigation; indeed, one can have an "ethnographic case study," or a "phenomenological case study," and so on. Further, we reasoned that "critical qualitative research" and "postmodern research" from the first edition represented epistemological orientations that can inform the design of *any* qualitative study in terms of how the "problem" of the study is framed, the questions asked, what literature is reviewed, and generally the implementation and reporting of the study's findings. Such is the case with many of the articles presented in *Qualitative Research in Practice*. However, as we point out in the first chapter, there is a wide range of opinion by writers and methodologists in qualitative research as to how many "types" or "designs" there are. Other editors may have selected different formats. Nonetheless, all adhere to the basic interpretive/constructivist philosophical orientation underlying all qualitative research.

Chapter 2 focuses on assessing and evaluating qualitative research. Determining the "quality" and "trustworthiness" of this type of research involves consideration of what qualitative research is designed to do, and what criteria are appropriate for assessing its validity and reliability – criteria that are congruent with the philosophical assumptions underlying this paradigm. Chapter 2 contains two tables, the first being a general checklist of points to be considered when reading the articles in this volume to assess the "quality" of qualitative research, and the second being a table of strategies researchers might employ to assess trustworthiness and rigor.

The 16 articles in Part Two are organized into eight sections, each representing a particular qualitative research design (or a design with a major qualitative component). Each article is typeset for this text, but the format and the content of the original publications were not altered. There are two examples each of interpretive, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, arts-based, qualitative action research, and mixed methods designs. Each of the 16 articles is immediately followed by an author reflection, which we hope will further engage our readers in thinking about designing and implementing a qualitative study of their own.

## Acknowledgments

First to be acknowledged are the authors of the articles included in this volume. You were wonderfully responsive to having your article included and to writing your reflections on conducting a qualitative research study. Sharing your thoughts, your "ups and downs," your apprehensions and mishaps, your insights and "aha" moments, reveals just how engaging, and at times frustrating and yet

rewarding conducting a qualitative study can be! Your contribution will be appreciated by students, novices, and experienced researchers alike.

We would also like to thank Kristi Kaeppel. We could not have completed this book without your invaluable assistance in identifying articles and providing administrative support. Finally, we want to thank Pete Gaughan, editor at Jossey-Bass, for your helpful and always timely assistance in many of the details of bringing this project to fruition.

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# About the Editors

**Sharan B. Merriam** is a professor emerita of adult and continuing education and qualitative research at the University of Georgia in Athens, where her responsibilities included teaching graduate courses in adult education and qualitative research methods and supervising graduate student research. She received her BA degree in English literature from Drew University, her MEd degree in English education from Ohio University, and her EdD degree in adult education from Rutgers University. Before coming to the University of Georgia, she served on the faculties of Northern Illinois University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Merriam's research and writing activities have focused on the foundations of adult education, adult development and learning, and qualitative research methods. She has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education. For five years, she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly,* the major research and theory journal in adult education. She has won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for four different books. Her most recent books include *A Guide to Research for Educators and Trainers of Adults* (with Patricia Cranton, 2015), *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (with Elizabeth J. Tisdell, 2016), *Adult Learning: Linking Theory and Practice* (with Laura Bierema, 2014), *Contemporary Issues in Adult Education* (with Andre Grace, 2011), and *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing* (2007),

Based on her widespread contributions to the field of adult education, Merriam has been inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame and was the first to receive the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education's Career Achievement award. She regularly conducts workshops and seminars on adult learning and qualitative research methods throughout North America and overseas. She has been a senior Fulbright scholar to Malaysia and a distinguished visiting scholar to universities in Thailand, South Korea, and South Africa.

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Grenier's work focuses on informal learning across the lifespan, with a particular interest in learning in museums and other cultural institutions. She has taught qualitative research courses at the graduate level for over 14 years, as well as presenting, consulting, and writing about qualitative inquiry in education and human resource development. She has served two terms on the Board of Directors for the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD), was a founder of the AHRD qualitative SIG, and serves as a Fulbright U.S. Student Program's National Screening Committee Member for Scandinavia. In 2014, she was a Fulbright scholar to the University of Iceland, where she taught courses in museum studies and conducted research on adult learning in museums. Grenier is also a mom to Catherine and spouse to Paul. The three live in Mansfield Center, Connecticut, and spend their time together traveling, watching hockey, and doing all things geeky.

# Qualitative Research in Practice

Part One

# The Nature of Qualitative Inquiry

Chapter One

# Introduction to Qualitative Research

Drawing from a long tradition in anthropology and sociology, qualitative research has achieved a status and visibility in the social sciences and applied fields of practice equal to quantitative designs such as surveys and experiments. Reports of qualitative research studies can be found in journals in social work, nursing, counseling, family relations, administration, health, community services, management, all subfields of education, and even medicine. Some disciplines have their own qualitative research journal, as do education (*International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*), social work (*Qualitative Social Work*), health *(Qualitative Health Research*), and management (*Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*). In addition, there are journals devoted to qualitative research itself such as *Qualitative Inquiry*, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *The Qualitative Report*, and *Qualitative Research*. There is also an endless selection of methodological texts on qualitative research generally, specific types of qualitative research, or some aspect of qualitative data collection or analysis.

What is the nature of qualitative inquiry that has captured the attention of so many? The purpose of this chapter is to explain what qualitative research is, how it differs from positivist or quantitative research, what variations exist within the qualitative paradigm, and how one goes about conducting a qualitative study. This chapter and the following chapter on evaluating and assessing qualitative research offer the backdrop for exploring the collection of qualitative studies and author commentaries that follows.

## The Nature of Qualitative Research

The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals interacting with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. For example, a qualitative researcher might be interested in identifying reasons adults drop out of a

community-based adult literacy program before achieving their goals. Any number of factors might emerge in interviews with participants, including some that hadn't been identified in previous studies or that hadn't occurred to the researcher. This qualitative approach contrasts with a quantitative approach wherein the researcher identifies the factors *ahead of time* and then seeks to measure the prevalence and strength of each factor. Qualitative researchers are interested in knowing how people understand and experience their world at a particular point in time and in a particular context. Exploring how individuals experience and interact with their social world, and the meaning it has for them, is based on an *interpretive* (or *constructivist*) perspective embedded in qualitative approach.

There are two other philosophical perspectives that largely inform the design of qualitative research. Drawing from critical social theory, you might investigate how the social and political aspects of the context shape how people see or understand the situation; that is, how larger contextual factors affect the ways in which individuals construct reality. This would be a critical qualitative approach. Using the same example of dropouts from an adult literacy program from a critical qualitative perspective, you would be interested in how the literacy program is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are served and perpetuated at the expense of others. Perhaps the program is offered at a location that is difficult to get to via public transportation, or at hours incompatible with parents' childcare responsibilities, or the program is offered at a site that low-literate adults find intimidating such as a college campus. Whose interests does this program serve? How do power, privilege, and oppression play out?

Critical social science research has its own variations. Much of feminist research draws from critical theory, as does participatory or participatory action research, a form of research that involves participants in the design and implementation of a study. Some critical research incorporates a strong emancipatory agenda along with critique; that is, in the process of conducting the investigation the overall objective is to empower participants to not only question, but also to change their situation. Cranton (2015) summarizes this perspective as follows:

> Emancipatory knowledge is gained through a process of critically questioning ourselves and the social systems within which we live. . . . If we do not question current scientific and social theories and accepted truths, we may never realize how we are constrained by their inevitable distortions and errors. (p. 315)

The third, and somewhat less common than an interpretive/constructivist or critical perspective in designing a qualitative study, is a philosophy called postmodern. Here researchers question all aspects of the construction of reality, what it is and what it is not, how it is organized, and so on. "Postmodern researchers view reality and knowledge as fragmented, multiple situated, and multi-faced. On these premises, reality is thought to be nearly impossible to know or represent" (Tracy, 2013, p. 44). Tracy goes on to write that "in stark contrast to positivists, who view good research as mirroring reality, postmodernists would note that mirrors

are warped, fractured, and reflect back onto the scene (and therefore affect it). . . . The best a postmodern researcher can do, then, is to choose a shard of a shattered mirror and realize that it only reflects one sliver of the world" (p. 45). A postmodern inquiry would question and "disrupt" the dichotomies inherent in the literacy program above; for example, the dichotomies of "completers versus noncompleters," or "successful versus unsuccessful," or "graduates versus dropouts" might be challenged. Lather (2006) lays out these three overarching theoretical perspectives in terms of understanding (interpretive), emancipation (critical and feminist are included here), and deconstruction (postmodern).

As a qualitative researcher, you can approach an investigation from any of these perspectives. Your particular perspective will determine the specific research design that you employ for actually carrying out your study. If your primary interest is in understanding a phenomenon, you have many design options, the most common being interpretive, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative. Critical, feminist, postmodern, and participatory studies all have goals that include understanding, but go further in the purpose or inquiry.

Several key characteristics cut across the various qualitative research designs (also called forms, types, methodologies, or genres by various authors). The first characteristic is that researchers strive to *understand the meaning people have constructed* about their world and their experiences; that is, how do people make sense of their experience? As Patton (2015) explains: "What makes us different from other animals is our capacity to assign meaning to things. The essence of being human is integrating and making sense of experience (Loevinger, 1976). Qualitative research inquires into, documents, and interprets the meaning-making process" (p. 3). As qualitative researchers, we want to understand how people make sense of their lives and how they understand the world around them. We find out how people make meaning of their experiences by asking them in interviews, and/or observing the phenomenon of interest, and/or analyzing relevant documents/artifacts.

A second characteristic of all forms of qualitative research designs is that *the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis.* In contrast to a survey or an experiment, the human instrument can immediately respond and adapt. Questions that don't "work" in an interview can be changed, as can sites for observations and fieldwork. Other advantages are that the researchers can expand their understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses. Further, because the human instrument can simultaneously analyze data as the data are being collected, adjustments in data collection can be made that may yield a more robust analysis and understanding of the phenomenon.

When the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, it is wise to be aware of one's shortcomings and biases that might impact the study. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or "subjectivities," it is

important to identify them and monitor them as to how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data. Peshkin (1988) goes so far as to make the case that one's subjectivities "can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (p. 18).

Qualitative researchers are interested in how people understand and make meaning of their world. Often there is no convincing explanation, or an existing theory fails to adequately illuminate the phenomenon of interest. Therefore, another important characteristic of qualitative research is that *the process is inductive*; rather than deductively deriving hypotheses to be tested (as in positivist research), researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theory. In attempting to understand the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved, qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field. Typically, findings inductively derived from the data in a qualitative study are in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, or even a substantive theory, that is, one that addresses a specific real-world situation.

Finally, because qualitative research is designed to understand a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives, the product of a qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*. Rather than relying on numbers, words and sometimes pictures are used to convey what the researcher has learned about the topic of the study. In order to convey this understanding, the write-up of a qualitative study usually includes descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest. The "findings" of a qualitative study are supported by quotations from participant interviews, selections from documents or the researcher's field notes, descriptions of artifacts, excerpts from videotapes, photos, and so on. A reader can think of these data as "evidence" for the findings of the study.

In summary, qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's viewpoint. The researcher can approach the phenomena from an interpretive, critical, or postmodern perspective. All qualitative research is characterized by the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and a richly descriptive end product.

## Distinguishing Among Types of Qualitative Research Design

From education to anthropology to management science, researchers, students, and practitioners are conducting qualitative studies. It is not surprising, then, that different disciplines and fields ask different questions and have evolved somewhat different strategies and procedures. Writers of qualitative texts have organized the diversity of forms of qualitative research in various ways. Patton (2015), for example, presents sixteen orientations to qualitative research according to the different kinds of questions researchers from different disciplines might ask.

Creswell (2013) has identified five "traditions" – narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) identify several "strategies of inquiry" including case study, ethnography, mixed methods, grounded theory, and participatory action research. They write that qualitative research, while used in "many separate disciplines, . . . does not belong to a single discipline. Nor does qualitative research have a distinct set of methods that are entirely its own." Rather, it is "a set of complex interpretive practices" (p. 6).

Given the variety of qualitative research approaches, we have chosen to organize this resource book around eight designs that center on or include a substantial component of qualitative methods. Of the eight, five are exclusively qualitative in the design and conduct of the study: interpretive, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry. Three more recent designs incorporate a significant component of qualitative data – arts-based research, qualitative action research, and mixed methods. These and other types of qualitative research do have some attributes in common that result in their falling under the umbrella concept of "qualitative." However, they each have a somewhat different focus, resulting in variations in how the research question might be asked, how the sample is selected, how data are collected and analyzed, and how findings are presented. The following is a short description of each of the eight designs. More thorough discussions of each, along with examples and author commentaries, can be found in Part Two.

## Interpretive

An interpretive and descriptive qualitative study exemplifies all the characteristics of qualitative research discussed above; that is, the researcher is first and foremost interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon. This meaning is mediated through the researcher as instrument, data analysis is inductive, and the outcome is descriptive. In conducting an interpretive qualitative study, you seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved, or a combination of these. Data are collected through interviews, observations, and/or documents/artifacts. These data are inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data. A rich, descriptive account of the findings is presented and discussed, using references to the literature that framed the study in the first place. Exactly what questions are asked will depend upon one's discipline and the literature one is using to frame the study. For example, in Roulston, Jutras, and Kim's (2015) study of adults' perceptions and experiences of learning musical instruments, the researchers interviewed 15 adults in the southeastern United States who were learning to play instruments to understand the participants' prior experiences in music, their motivations for learning to play instruments, and their learning goals, learning strategies they employ, the benefits that they attribute to their engagement in musical activities, and the challenges faced.

Often researchers are hesitant to use what some label a generic or basic design and feel they must name or categorize the type of qualitative research they are conducting using terms such as "case study," "grounded theory," or "phenomenology" when in fact they *are* employing a well-used design: interpretive. The majority of qualitative research studies in education and other fields of practice fall under this design and are labeled simply as "a qualitative study."

## Phenomenology

Because phenomenology as a school of philosophical thought underpins all qualitative research, some assume that all qualitative research is phenomenological, and certainly in one sense it is. However, even though the phenomenological notions of experience and understanding run through all qualitative research, one could also engage in a phenomenological study using its own "tools" or inquiry techniques that differentiate it from other qualitative designs.

In the same way that ethnography focuses on culture, a phenomenological study focuses on the essence or structure of an experience. Phenomenologists are interested in showing how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience. This form of inquiry is an attempt to deal with inner experiences unexamined in everyday life. According to Patton (2015), this type of qualitative research design is based on

> the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience*. . . . The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon, for example, the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a participant in a particular program. (p. 116, emphasis in original)

In order to understand the essence or structure of an experience, the researcher temporarily puts aside, or "brackets," personal attitudes or beliefs about the phenomenon. With belief temporarily suspended, consciousness itself becomes heightened, allowing the researcher to intuit or see the essence of the phenomenon. Topics well suited to a phenomenological approach often have to do with emotions and inner feelings such as a study of children's spirituality (Natsis, 2017), career anxiety among college students (Pisarik, Rowell, & Thompson, 2017), or Ruth-Sahd and Tisdell's (2007) exploration of how intuitive knowing influences the practice of novice nurses.

## Ethnography

This form of qualitative research design has a long tradition in the field of anthropology. It was developed by anthropologists specifically to study human society and culture. Although culture has been variously defined, it usually refers to the beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape the behavior of a particular group of people. D'Andrade (1992) writes that culture is something behaviorally and

cognitively shared by an identifiable group of people and that it has "the potential of being passed on to new group members, to exist with some permanency through time and across space" (p. 230).

Confusion results when the term "ethnography" is used interchangeably with fieldwork, participant observation, case study, and so on. For a qualitative study to be termed "ethnography," it must present a sociocultural interpretation of the data. Therefore, ethnography is not defined by how data are collected, although doing an ethnographic study almost always includes spending time on site with a particular sociocultural group, but rather by the lens through which the data are interpreted. An ethnographic study "re-creates for the reader the shared beliefs, practices, artifacts, folk knowledge, and behaviors of some group of people" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, pp. 2–3). Most people are familiar with ethnographies of foreign and exotic cultures, such as Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1973). But as Patton (2015) points out, today ethnographic studies are also about some aspect of contemporary society such as "Information Age culture, the culture of poverty, school culture, the culture of addiction, intercultural marriages, youth culture" and so on (p. 100). There are also numerous variations of ethnographies, such as autoethnography, performance ethnography, and critical ethnography. Hammersley (2017) underscores this proliferation of terms in his discussion of the definitions and multiple variations of ethnography ranging from corporate ethnography to feminist ethnography to virtual ethnography to autoethnography and so on. However, at the heart of any type of ethnographic research is the focus on a particular group's shared culture.

## Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss's 1967 book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* launched, or at least was key in the development of qualitative research as a viable research paradigm. The goal of this type of qualitative study is to derive inductively from data a theory that is "grounded" in the data – hence, grounded theory. Grounded theory research emphasizes discovery, with description and verification as secondary concerns. Researchers in this mode build substantive theory, which is distinguished from grand or formal theory. Substantive theory is localized, dealing with particular real-world situations such as how adults manage school, family, and work life, what constitutes an effective counseling program for teen mothers, or how a community allocates its resources.

Data gathered for a grounded theory study are analyzed via the constant comparative method of data analysis, which involves continually comparing one unit of data with another in order to derive conceptual elements of the theory. Many researchers using other qualitative designs have adopted this method, even though they may not be developing theory. This has resulted in claims by some researchers that they are doing a grounded theory study when in fact there is no substantive theory as an outcome of the inquiry. A grounded theory consists of categories, properties, and hypotheses that state relationships among categories

and properties. Unlike hypotheses in experimental studies, grounded theory hypotheses are tentative and suggestive rather than tested.

## Narrative Inquiry

The key to this design is the use of *stories* as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form. "Stories organize and shape our experiences and also tell others about our lives, relationships, journeys, decisions, successes, and failures" (Patton, 2015, p. 128). Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) write that narrative inquiry "typically takes the perspective of the teller, rather than that of the society" (p. 465). Context is important, however, for "if one defines narrative as a story with a beginning, middle, and end that reveals someone's experiences, narratives take many forms, are told in many settings, before many audiences, and with various degrees of connection to actual events or persons" (p. 465).

Central to narrative inquiry is the process of analyzing people's stories. There are several strategies one can use to do the actual analysis of narratives or people's stories. The three most common are psychological, biographical, and discourse analysis. In the psychological approach, the story is analyzed in terms of internal thoughts and motivations. A more biographical approach attends to the person in relation to society and takes into account the influences of gender, class, race, and family beginnings (Denzin, 2014). Discourse analysis examines the written text of the story for its component parts or assesses the spoken words by looking for intonation, pitch, and pauses as lenses to the meaning of the text (Gee, 2014). For a discussion of issues involved in analyzing narratives in a longitudinal narrative study of adults living with serious illnesses, see Bruce, Beuthin, Shields, Molzahn, and Schick-Makaroff (2016). Whatever the approach to analyzing the data, the central defining feature of this type of qualitative research is that the data are in the form of a story.

## Arts-Based Research

The various designs of qualitative research discussed above have been well defined and understood for decades if not longer (as in the case of ethnography, which originated with anthropologists). More recently, several newer approaches to qualitative research have emerged. One such approach, known as arts-based research, is capturing the attention of qualitative researchers looking for creative means of gathering data as well as presenting the findings of a qualitative study. Lawrence (2015) defines arts-based research as "research using any form of art (visual art, music, poetry, dance, etc.) in the data collection, analysis, and/or reporting of research" (p. 142). Examples of the diversity of applications of arts-based research include: digital bricolage with doctoral students to create digital representations of their professional identities (Armstrong, 2018); Alexander's (2016) exploration of songwriting as a form of research; and an essay presented as a series of poems that fictionalize professors' and students' experiences and

narratives of sexual harassment in the academy through the use of the cartoon character Hello Kitty (Faulkner, Calafell, & Grimes, 2009).

Because qualitative research aims to uncover the meaning people make of their experiences and their lives in general, artistic forms of expression merely extend the researcher's means of understanding a phenomenon. Drama, painting, literature, and so on are expressions of the human condition. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note:

> The point of incorporating art into research is partly in recognition of the fact that people make meaning and express it in different ways. . . . As artists and many teachers know, people also often make meaning in new and *even deeper* ways when asked to express something through symbol, photography, visual art, music, metaphor, dance, poetry, or other forms of creative expression. (p. 65)

Moreover, a case can be made that the artistic presentation of research findings, such as through drama, dance, musical performance, or an artistic display, can reach a much larger audience than does a publication in an academic journal. Further, arts-based research can be used "for raising awareness and mobilizing for change" (Lawrence, 2015, p. 144).

### Qualitative Action Research

Action research is conducted by those who want to address some problem or issue in their workplace or community and take action based on the findings. For example, a health practitioner might want to know what incentives patients need to take their medication as directed. They will collect and analyze the data, then implement the incentive plan and collect further data to understand the outcomes. Or a teacher might wonder whether sending students to sights in their community might more actively engage students in learning about the town's history. The teacher might work with the students to design the study, collect and analyze data, and address the findings in their school. Action research involves participants in both designing and carrying out the study. The participants, like the patients and students in the above examples, actively help design the study, engage in data collection and analysis, and in some cases present the findings.

## Mixed Methods

We have included mixed-methods research design in this book on qualitative research because it is a research methodology that always includes a component of qualitative inquiry along with more quantitative components. Creswell (2015) defines the growing use of mixed-methods research in the social sciences as "an approach to research . . . in which the investigator gathers both quantitative (closed-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems" (p. 2).

There are at least three possible ways of structuring a mixed-method study. One can simultaneously collect both qualitative and quantitative data to address the research question. For example, in a study of how prospective students make decisions as to which colleges to apply to, a large sample might be administered a survey and at the same time a sample of students could be interviewed for more in-depth analysis. A second type of mixed-methods design is to first administer a survey instrument to a relevant (often random) sample of participants, then follow up with interviews with those who filled out the survey and/or others fitting the same profile as survey respondents. The interviews help the researcher understand responses to the survey instrument as well as provide additional insights into the phenomenon of interest. Creswell (2015) calls this an explanatory sequential design, as the qualitative data help explain the quantitative results. A third design, exploratory mixed methods (Creswell, 2015), is just the reverse of the explanatory sequential design because qualitative data are collected first. The analysis of the qualitative data is used in designing a quantitative component, usually a survey instrument. Whatever the order of collecting quantitative and qualitative data, mixed methods always includes a qualitative component that incorporates one of the other design approaches we have addressed in this chapter.

To summarize this brief overview of the different qualitative research designs, we see that the eight chosen for review vary widely in form and purpose. Not all qualitative research designs are the same; nor are terms such as "grounded theory," "ethnography," "narrative inquiry," and so on interchangeable. However, because of the underlying view of reality and the focus on understanding and meaning, the qualitative research designs reviewed here have some characteristics in common that allow them to be categorized as "qualitative."

## The Design of a Qualitative Study

The design of a qualitative study focused on interpretation includes shaping a problem from the literature, forming a research question, selecting a sample, collecting and analyzing data, and representing the findings. An understanding of this process is important for assessing the rigor and value of individual reports of research (see Chapter Two for more discussion on evaluating and assessing qualitative research). Presented here is a brief overview of the component parts of the process of conducting a qualitative research study.

**The Research Problem, Research Question, and Sample Selection**. A research study begins with you being curious about something, and that "something" is usually related to your work, your family, your community, or yourself. It can also come from social and political issues of the day or from the literature. Often these spheres intersect. For example, perhaps you work for a social service agency that assists the homeless in becoming stabilized in their housing needs. Your work is very much about a pressing social problem. Or you might have observed how comfortable your children are with computers and you wonder how people not brought up with computers are learning to function in this technological age.