Chapter 30 Introducing Qualitative Designs

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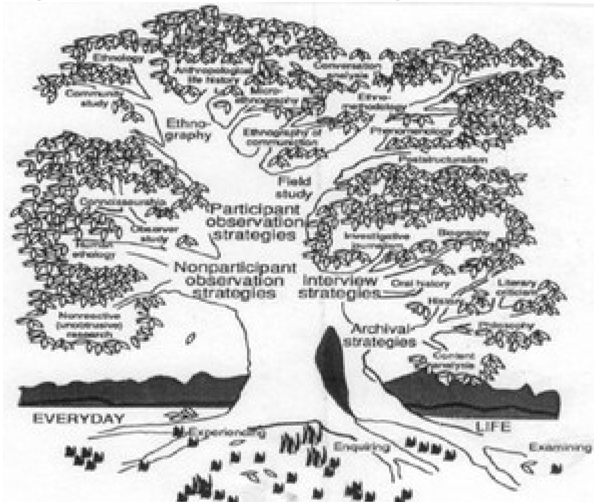
Skill

As you proceed ahead with your qualitative study, include a qualitative design.

Why the Skill Is Important

For publications, for sophisticated qualitative studies, and for proposals or applications for funded projects, you need to go beyond the basic skills addressed in this book and start to incorporate more advanced thinking through specific qualitative research designs. Although we see in many published studies a thematic analysis of data and no mention of a specific design, the use of designs that inform many aspects of the process of qualitative research has become much more frequent (Creswell, 2014). The first time I became aware of the specific types of qualitative designs available to the researcher was in work by Jacob in 1987. She essentially came up with a categorization of qualitative research into "traditions," such as ecological psychology, symbolic interactionism, and holistic ethnography. Looking back a couple of years earlier, I could now see that different ways of conducting qualitative research were emerging, and that the classic text on qualitative research by Lincoln and Guba (1985) embraced a specific procedure—case study research. My favorite classification from this period was the tree diagram from the famous educational ethnographer Harry Wolcott. As shown in Figure 30.1, the trunk of the tree consisted of nonparticipant observation strategies, participant observation strategies, interview strategies, and archival strategies. On the branches of this trunk hung 20 types of qualitative approaches. The trunk and branches were then grounded into dimensions of everyday life.

Figure 30.1 Qualitative Strategies in Educational Research



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I also knew that *quantitative research* had unfolded as specific designs, emerging from the correlational and group comparison experiments to an elaboration of different types of quasi-experimental and experimental designs and their accompanying threats to validity announced by Campbell and Stanley (1963). *Quantitative research* then expanded into the diverse approaches that we know today, including surveys, single-subject research, and the multiple experimental research forms. I felt that it was a matter of time until qualitative research did the same. By the early 1990s, it had done just that, and multiple authors came forward with their qualitative designs in specific books. For example, Strauss and Corbin (1990) announced a specific grounded theory approach, Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology, and Stake (1995) wrote about his case study design. The discussions about different types of qualitative research and these specific books on procedures led me to write *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Creswell, 1998) to place side by side five different approaches to qualitative design so that inquirers might be able to select which approach might be best for their particular studies. So, today we have multiple approaches for how to design a qualitative study, and this design can be added to the skill base introduced in the chapters in this book to yield a more advanced design. A design is how to plan and conduct a research study, and the topics in this book have threaded throughout this process from philosophy, through methods, to conclusions and interpretations. Using a qualitative design helps reviewers identify the type of qualitative study you employ, adds to the rigor and sophistication of a study, and provides useful techniques for framing your project.

Moving From Generic to Types of Qualitative Designs

What exactly changes from the basic design of qualitative research as we move toward the incorporation of a specific type of research design? We can find clues about whether a qualitative study is more basic or incorporates a specific qualitative design. We must look into the methods section of a study and first see what types of qualitative data collection and analysis are used, and then examine how the inquirer reports the findings or results of a study.

- In a basic study, the authors do not identify a specific *design type*. Instead of reporting that the study used a design such as phenomenology or grounded theory, the authors typically report that they collected interviews, observations, or documents. In short, the data collection is not grounded in a specific design.
- Turning to the *findings* in a study, in a basic approach, the authors report only themes and seldom do much else (perhaps they might interrelate the themes). When a qualitative design is used, the research follows the approach to reporting findings that is consistent with the design, such as the phenomenological procedures of significant statements, meaning units and the essence, or the grounded theory procedures of different types of coding (open, axial, or selective). In short, the findings section looks different between a generic approach and the use of a design.
- The *outcome* of a study will look different between a basic approach and a type of design. In the basic approach, the author often advances a diagram or picture of the overall findings. When the author uses a design, a distinct outcome emerges consistent with the design, such as a theory in grounded theory, a narrative story in narrative research, or a discussion of the essence of the phenomenon in phenomenology.
- The framing of the *research questions* will also differ. Although all qualitative questions need to be open ended to allow the participants to express their diverse views, the wording of the questions will differ between a basic design and a study that uses a specific research design. For example, contrast these two statements:
    - Basic: What does it mean to "bully" another person?

    - Grounded theory: What theory emerges about the process that occurs when one person “bullies” another?
- The second statement illustrates how the specific language changes when a design is used. Consistent with good grounded theory practice, we learn that the focus will be on a “process” and that the outcome of the study will be the identification of a “theory.” This language labels the research question as a grounded theory statement (see Creswell, 2013).
- Many *aspects of the study* are also framed differently between a basic design and the specific use of a qualitative design. For example, the author titles the study differently, as well as the use of theory, the writing structure, and the evaluation criteria used to assess the quality of the study.

After you have mastered the basic skills in this book, explore the types of qualitative designs available to researchers and select one that addresses the intent of your study.

The Choice of Five Designs to Emphasize

Taking our cue from the Wolcott’s (1992) tree, we have many types of qualitative designs (or what he called strategies) from which to select. When I decided to write about the various types (Creswell, 1998), I considered what types were most prevalent in the social and health sciences. I then conferred with my publisher, SAGE Publications, and I looked across a number of journals to see what types were being identified. Remember, this was in the late 1990s, and I wanted to reflect different disciplinary perspectives as well as popular approaches at that time. I also wanted to be able to point the reader toward at least one book that laid out the design type in a systematic manner. The beginning researcher, I felt, needed some concrete guidance for conducting qualitative research. I also wanted to include in the book recent journal publications so that the reader could see at least one good example of a published study using the design. Finally, I had engaged in a number of these designs in my own research, and I needed to try out each approach before I could recommend it. Now, writing about 15 years later, I understand that the field of qualitative research has moved forward. More and more individuals, for example, are using participatory action research designs as well as discourse analysis designs. I could certainly add more approaches, but ultimately I chose five approaches to emphasize:

- Narrative research
- Phenomenology
- Grounded theory
- Ethnography
- Case study

Narrative Research

A narrative research study would report an interesting story about the personal experiences of an individual. In it, the author would:

- Focus on a *single individual* (or two or three individuals). In many narrative projects, there is a focus on a single individual that the researcher selects on the basis of criteria, such as an

ordinary person, a person of strong conceptual interest, or a well-known individual. The characteristics of individuals studied in narrative research vary. Sometimes qualitative researchers select more than one individual, but the intent is the same: to report stories about the individual's life that illuminates a specific issue. This focus may be in the form of an autoethnography or autobiography that features the stories of the author, a biography of another person, or stories of individuals in a classroom or specific situation.

- Collect stories about the *individual's experiences* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These stories result from diverse types of data from interviews, observations, and documents. These stories often have a narrative arc with a beginning, a middle, and an end.
- Develop a *chronology* that connects different phases or aspects of a story. It is not necessary, but these stories may be told chronologically, over time, punctuated by events. Sometimes these stories can begin at the end, or at the middle, rather than being told in a linear, timeline fashion. Because individuals do not typically tell stories in a linear fashion, it is up to the researcher to "restory" the story, to place it within a chronological story line (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).
- Analyze the stories for *themes*. From the overall story, the qualitative researcher can identify themes that emerge from the story as well as report the overall story. Typically, the writing structure is to first report the story and then highlight several themes to emerge from the story.
- Highlight an *epiphany* or *significant turning point* in the life of the individual. At these points, the story takes a decided turn or new development that shapes the outcome of the story.
- Place the story and themes within a specific *context* or *situations*. The narrative researcher discusses to some extent the context or setting of the stories and the themes. This helps develop the context in which the stories are told. This context may be the workplace, the home, friends, or any other setting in which the stories take place. This provides necessary detail for the stories.

Phenomenological Research

In a phenomenological study, I would want to see a detailed description of how a number of individuals experience a specific phenomenon. Such a study would be one in which the author:

- Focuses on a single *phenomenon* to explore. The researcher identifies a specific concept or phenomenon to study. This concept may be something like "loneliness," "developing a professional identity," or "being a charismatic leader." It is a single concept and is the centerpiece of the phenomenological study.
- Collects data from *individuals who have experienced the phenomenon*. This is an important idea in phenomenology. Individuals studied must have had experience with the phenomenon. The size of the group may vary from 3 to 15 individuals. The forms of data collected in a phenomenological study, however, are diverse, and can range from the typical form of one-on-one interviews to an eclectic array of data sources such as observations, documents such as poems and written letters, and music and sounds. The key question to be answered is "How are individuals experiencing the phenomenon?"
- Explores the *context* in which the individuals experience the phenomenon. Besides an understanding of how the individuals experience the phenomenon, the researcher is also interested in the question "What is the context in which the individuals are experiencing the phenomenon?" This context may be the specific setting, individuals, conversations, the workplace, or the home.

- Frames the study within a broad *philosophy*. Phenomenology has strong philosophical roots and is based on the key idea that the lived experiences of individuals involve both the subjective experiences of people as well as an objective experience of sharing something with others.
- *Brackets out* personal experiences. Phenomenologists discuss how they set aside their personal experiences in order to learn how the individuals they study experience the phenomenon of interest. Of course, this is impossible to do completely, but we find in good phenomenology a discussion about the author's personal experience with the phenomenon so that he or she can best report on the experiences of others.
- Reports on the *essence* of the experience. The essence is simply the common experiences of individuals—what they have in common about the phenomenon (e.g., loneliness). This essence is reported as a discussion toward the end of the study. A phenomenologist gets to this essence through a series of steps, such as locating significant statements in the interview transcripts, developing meaning units that aggregate these statements, and then developing a description of what the individuals have experienced and the context of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, the phenomenologist reports a detailed description of how several individuals commonly experience the phenomenon—the essence of the phenomenon.

Grounded Theory

In a grounded theory study, the intent of the researcher is to generate a theory that explains a process, an action, or an interaction. Specifically, the author:

- Seeks a *general explanation*, a *theory*, of a process, or how people act or interact (e.g., how a committee decides to implement a new program). This qualitative design requires knowing about the nature of a theory, especially as traditionally viewed within the social and behavioral sciences. A theory is an explanation that helps predict what will occur, how people will behave, or how events will unfold in many situations. We say that a theory can be generalized to many situations and can range from a narrow theory (e.g., how one committee at one school implements a new program) to a broad theory (e.g., how the implementation of a new program works in many settings, such as the YMCA, the Girl Scouts, the Congregational church, the elementary school, and so forth).
- Reports how the *process* of the theory unfolds. The qualitative researcher reports on how the process unfolds in steps—what occurs first, what occurs second, and so forth. A process is something that unfolds over time in somewhat distinct steps that can be identified.
- Documents this process with evidence from *interviews* and from *memos*. Interviews are the typical form of data collection for grounded theory. From these interviews, the grounded theorist documents how the process unfolds over time. While these interviews are being conducted, the researcher writes memos of what the process might look like. So data collection in grounded theory is an interactive process of collecting data, writing memos about the process, and forging the final picture of the process.
- Advances a theory. The grounded theory project culminates in the *identification of a theory*, a general explanation of a process (or an action or interaction). The researcher may develop this theory on the basis of a series of analytic steps that include coding the data in several ways, such as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The theory may appear as a description of the explanation of the process, or, more likely, it may appear as a diagram that highlights the major steps in the theory and the process that was involved. Accompanying the diagram may be hypotheses or research questions that the theory raises for future testing.

Ethnographic Research

The basic idea of an ethnographic study is to describe how a cultural group develops patterns of action, talking, and behavior from interacting together over time. The author:

- Identifies a *culture-sharing group* and what is of interest to study about this group. This group is an intact one that has been interacting for some time (e.g., a punk rock group). In their process of interaction, they have begun to develop shared ways about how they talk, how they behave, their rituals, their ways of communicating, their patterns of dress, and many other aspects of what we would call "culture." The ethnographer may focus on one aspect of the culture for close inspection (i.e., cultural concepts or theory), such as their communication, or may more broadly seek to describe many aspects of their culture (e.g., their dress, their interaction). This culture-sharing group can be quite large, such as Native Americans who belong to the Cherokee tribe, or quite small, such as a single elementary school classroom of 20 people.
- Records beliefs, ideas, behaviors, language, and rituals primarily through conducting *interviews* and *observations*. A cultural theme is specified that will be examined in light of this culture-sharing group.
- Spends *considerable time* with the group to learn about the culture they share. A hallmark of good ethnography is that the researcher spends extended periods of time "in the field" with the culture-sharing group. This time may be 6 months or longer. The idea is that patterns of behavior, language, and ideas evolve over time, and the ethnographer needs to examine how these patterns develop and become established within a group. This all takes time.
- Develops a detailed *description* and *themes* of how the group works. The end product of an ethnography is a detailed description about the culture sharing, followed by themes that describe the patterns of beliefs, ideas, behaviors, and language that have emerged over time with the group. On the basis of this description and themes, the ethnographer then writes a description about how the culture-sharing group works. Often this description is one that members of the group may not realize or consciously reflect. It may also not be one that an "outsider" to the group knows about. Good ethnographies, for example, have been written about inner-city gangs and how they operate—certainly workings that are not usually familiar to people or consciously reflected by members of the gang. Sometimes this description is written as a set of "rules" for how the culture-sharing group works (see Creswell, 2013).

Case Study Research

The basic idea in case study research is to select a case (or several cases, a multiple case study) and describe how the case illustrates a problem or an issue. This leads to an in-depth analysis of the case. The author would:

- Clearly *identify the case* being described in the study. A case could be a concrete entity such as a group, an individual, an organization, a community, a relationship, a decision process, or a specific project. Case studies are often used to study or evaluate programs. A case study could encompass many people or a few people or span a long period of time or a short period. In other words, it is bounded by time and place, and its borders can clearly be separated from the larger context of which it is a part. The research could involve a single case or multiple cases. The researcher therefore identifies the case and describes its bounding.
- Describe the case of interest (and it may be an unusual case and of intrinsic interest), but the researcher chooses the case in order to provide insight into an *issue* or a *problem*. A study of

adolescent pregnancy (an issue) may be understood by examining one specific center (the case) that provides support for pregnant adolescent girls. The issue may be broad in scope, or confined to a small geographical area. The case bounds where the issue is studied.

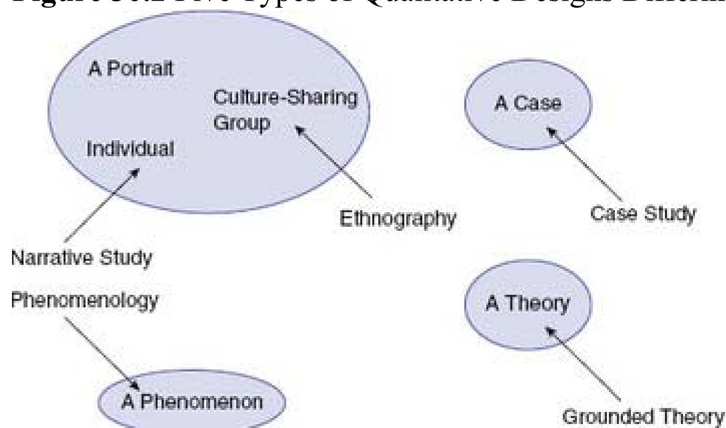
- Collect *multiple sources of data* to provide an in-depth perspective about the issue within the case. A hallmark of good case study work is the collection and analysis of multiple sources of qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, documents, and visual materials. In many case studies, we see a table that organizes various sources of data and reports on the expansive extent of the data collection to develop the in-depth description of the case.
- Develop the case. The end product of a case study is a case. The *analysis* of the multiple sources of information results in this detailed description of the case, followed by the themes that emerge from the data, and generalizations (or assertions) about the case (Stake, 1995). Generalizations are ways in which the issue being explored is now better understood by learning about the case. In the end, the reader should emerge with an in-depth analysis of the issue being explored by the case study.

How Do You Choose What Design Is Appropriate for Your Project?

Certainly several factors contribute to your choice of one of these five types of qualitative designs. At the top of my list would be the overall intent of your project. Each of these five designs leads to different "products" at the end of your qualitative study. Examine Figure 30.2, a decision tree that might be useful to help you select the best type of qualitative design for a project.

As shown in this figure, if your research question focuses on developing a portrait of an individual, then narrative research would be the best qualitative design. Also, developing a portrait of a culture-sharing group would lead to an ethnography. A case study emerges when the question relates to describing a case, and a phenomenological study results from exploring the experiences of individuals about a phenomenon. In grounded theory, the outcome of the study leads to the development of a theory, a general explanation for a process. Beyond the intent to be accomplished by your question, other factors will play a role in the selection of your qualitative design: the audience for your study and their knowledge of qualitative designs, your training in learning specific types of designs, the needs in your scholarly literature, and your personal preference for a more structured approach (e.g., grounded theory) or a more literary approach (e.g., narrative research).

Figure 30.2 Five Types of Qualitative Designs Differing by Intent of the Research Question



An Example, “Turning the Story”

To illustrate these five types, I will create a simple qualitative research project and then discuss how each design would be crafted differently given the type of design used. Assume that we are interested in this question: How do students learn qualitative research in the graduate school classroom? This question is broad enough so that any of the five approaches could be used. But as I have just discussed, the intent or outcome of the study will differ widely depending on your design. This “turning of the story” way of highlighting differences among the five types of qualitative designs was used in the last chapter of my qualitative inquiry book (Creswell, 2013), as I mentioned in Chapter 27 when I talked about designing different types of conclusions.

Using a *narrative* design, I would select an individual in the class to tell the story of learning qualitative research. It might be the student who has tested best in the class so far, or it might be someone who is available and willing to participate in my study. I would interview the person as well as his or her friends and perhaps look at the notes they have taken in class. As I go over this information I am thinking about the storyline I would like to write, preferably a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. During the interview, of course, the participant will not tell me the story in the way I will tell it (I will be restorying the participant’s story). I will look for “a-ha” moments in the story (a turning point) where the participant changed direction during the class or had a sudden insight about qualitative research. I would highlight this turning point. I might also emphasize themes that emerge from the data, such as learning through books in the class or through interacting with other students. In the end, I would write an interesting story about this individual’s personal experiences and wrap the story around the turning point of his or her interest in qualitative research.

In my *phenomenological* design, I would be interested in knowing how several people in the class (say, 10 of them) all have common experiences with learning qualitative research. I would try to set aside my own experiences with the class and conduct interviews with the 10 students. I would then ask them, “What did you experience in this class?” and “What was the context in which you experienced qualitative research?” I would then analyze the data and describe what all of my participants had in common (the essence) about the experience and the various contexts (e.g., through the books, in conversations out in the hall, through the PowerPoint lectures) in which they best learned about qualitative research.

In my *grounded theory* design I would be interested in developing a theory about *how* the students learned qualitative research. What were the steps in this process? I would conduct interviews with several students in the class (maybe 10 again) and begin to develop a theory that explains their processes of learning. It might be that they learned best through visual diagrams of various aspects of qualitative research (e.g., a diagram of the theory) or through their own notes (memos) that they wrote during the class sessions. They might tell me that diagrams are a good method for learning. I would try to identify why diagrams are good methods, how diagrams were used in the class, what strategies the instructor employed in using the diagrams, and what their overall impact might be. These aspects would provide information about the process of learning qualitative research, and I would end by drawing a diagram (myself) of the process with all of the parts identified. In short, I would generate an explanation about the process of learning qualitative research through diagrams.

In my *ethnographic* study, I would view the class as a culture-sharing group. I would observe them through the semester-long class and conduct interviews with a few of them. From these sources of data I would be interested in the culture-sharing patterns that emerged—how they talked about

qualitative research, what they believed qualitative research to be, and how they typically engaged in learning the content (e.g., by sitting in the same seats each week). In my ethnographic report at the end of the semester I would describe the classroom context—how the content unfolded, where the students sat, how the delivery of content emerged during the semester, and other aspects to provide a good understanding of the culture-sharing classroom group. I would then identify several themes related to "learning qualitative research," such as the types of words they used to explain it that emerged during the semester. Through this report, I would be able to provide someone who was not in the class or not familiar with learning qualitative research a good description of how these students learned the subject and what patterns of experiences emerged during the semester.

In my *case study*, I would need to first identify my case. I might select the entire class as my case, and seek to develop a detailed description of the class as well as themes that emerged about an issue in the class, such as the "grading practices" used by the instructor. I would collect different sources of data, such as interviews, observation, and the syllabus (a document) that provides and understanding of grading. My case study would then first describe the case (e.g., the content, the sessions, when grading occurred, what was graded) and then identify themes that the data yielded about grading, such as students' reactions to the grading practices, how students felt about the fairness of grading, the types of grades actually given to the students by the instructor, and other themes. In the end, my case study report would be an in-depth understanding of grading using one case (the class) as a site where qualitative grading practices were implemented. My case study would first describe the case and then go into the themes of the case. I would end with some generalizations about what I learned about grading through this case.

Summary

This book has emphasized a large set of skills for engaging in qualitative research. It provides a basic understanding of the topic and the skills that will be useful in conducting a qualitative research study. It does not go into a more advanced level of understanding qualitative research, which can be obtained by studying the various types of qualitative designs. This advanced level is available in other books. In those books you will learn about specific designs, and plans for conducting qualitative research within those designs. In this chapter I have emphasized five types: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. They differ in what they attempt to accomplish: to present a good story of an individual's experiences (narrative research); to describe what a number of people experience about a phenomenon (phenomenological research); to develop a theoretical understanding of a process (grounded theory); to describe the patterns of ideas, behaviors, and language of a culture-sharing group of people (ethnography); or to provide an in-depth understanding of a case that is used to illuminate a specific issue (case study). From this basic skill orientation of this book, I would recommend now that you proceed on to a specific qualitative research design and select an appropriate design based on your research question and what you intend to accomplish with the design.

Activity

From the skills introduced in this book, identify those that would be most useful for you to use as you proceed to learn about a specific qualitative design for a project. Identify the skills and then discuss how you would use them in one of the five types of designs in this chapter—a narrative study, a phenomenological study, a grounded theory study, an ethnography, or a case study.

Further Resources

Examine these references for specific approaches to narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies:

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, E. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2007). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wolcott, H. F. (1999). *Ethnography: A way of seeing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira.

Wolcott, H. F. (2010). *Ethnography lessons: A primer*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast.

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