CHAPTER 1

THE CRAFT OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Holistic Approach

Imagine an epidemic is sweeping the globe, but this epidemic is like none ever seen before. The disease causing this epidemic has devastating physical consequences, and, unlike many other diseases, it includes a period often referred to as “living dying.” Sadly, there is no cure for this debilitating illness, and the mortality rate is increasing to such an extent that some populations are losing significant numbers of people. Without a cure, the outlook is bleak. But well beyond the devastating transmission and mortality rates of the disease is what really makes it unlike other diseases: the social meanings and stigma attached to infection, which vary across cultures. Beyond the social repercussions of the illness is a series of educational, health, and economic realities not associated with epidemics such as cancer that accompany this often long-term illness. Moreover, even family structures are altered by this disease, as roles are reversed, and young people are the ones getting sick, and seniors and sometimes children must care for the dying. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Of course we all know that we don’t have to “imagine” such an epidemic, we have one: human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), from which no group is immune.
Now imagine how desperately researchers from across disciplines (the social sciences, healthcare, education, and communications) would want to build knowledge about the disease and its various facets, including its social dimension and effective prevention and intervention strategies. For example, the medical community has acquired enough knowledge about the disease and its transmission that we now understand it to be a preventable illness. But how is this knowledge communicated differently to different groups in a global context? Moreover, despite the preventable nature of the illness, we are faced with a global epidemic. This raises a host of questions, such as: why do some people engage in risky sexual behavior, how does sexual identity shape sexual decision making, how does social context (education, geography, sexism, heterosexism) impact people’s intimate relationships and their sexuality? Why doesn’t sexually transmitted disease (STD) education in the United States seem to work? These are just a few of the questions that arise in trying to understand the HIV/AIDS epidemic. There are many other research questions that emerge when considering the experience of HIV/AIDS, from both a physical and social perspective. For example, what does it feel like to test positive, how does a positive diagnosis shape personal and sexual relationships as well as identity, what is the daily experience of a positive diagnosis in terms of the social stigma attached to the disease? There is also the experience of caring for a loved one with HIV/AIDS, which varies cross-culturally and often involves a restructuring of the family, financial challenges, and so forth.

The preceding represents just some of the questions researchers confront surrounding this social issue. These kinds of questions can only be asked and answered by working through the qualitative window into knowledge construction. These questions begin with words like “why,” “how,” and “what.” They require gaining complex knowledge directly from people with certain attributes or life experiences—knowledge about their experience and the contexts influencing their relations to others, behavioral choices, and attitudes. These are the kinds of questions that can be answered by qualitative approaches to research. By the time we return to this example in the concluding chapter, we hope that you will see how integral qualitative research is to our knowledge about HIV/AIDS and many other important issues.

**INTRODUCTION**

Many research books present a series of “methods”—techniques for gathering data. While this is an important component of the research process, the appropriate selection of research methods cannot be divorced from a researcher’s theoretical concerns as well as his or her conception of
knowledge building. Accordingly, this book is different from most other books about research methods in that we begin with an in-depth discussion of the knowledge-building process—holistically. That is to say, we first discuss all aspects of the knowledge-building process, of which method is one part. To talk about particular methods before talking about the assumptions about what is knowable, who is a knower, and how we come to know would be to put the cart before the horse. So, in this vein, in Part I we move into a discussion of the two major approaches to knowledge construction, then into a discussion of research design, including method selection, and end with a review of ethics and research. Additionally, while qualitative research methods vary greatly, what the perspectives covered in this text have in common is that they challenge positivistic views of knowledge building. Part II is devoted to an examination of particular methods.

Qualitative research is an exciting interdisciplinary landscape rich with perspectives on knowledge construction and enabled by a multitude of techniques available for generating knowledge. Qualitative practice offers a range of epistemological, theoretical, and methodological possibilities. With attention to the holistic nature of knowledge building, qualitative research is truly unique in content, focus, and form. When we say that the craft of qualitative research involves a holistic approach, we mean that the practice of qualitative research is reflexive and process driven, ultimately producing culturally situated and theory-enmeshed knowledge through an ongoing interplay between theory and methods, researcher and researched. Specifically, qualitative research differs from research models that focus on the creation of knowledge in a contained and event-oriented manner. As we will show, the holistic nature of the research process, the interplay between different phases of it, from topic selection to write-up, makes qualitative research a unique and important perspective and practice. Moreover, qualitative research produces both exploratory and highly descriptive knowledge while de-emphasizing the solely causal models and explanations that have historically dominated the research process.

More than a concept or a series of techniques that can simply be employed, qualitative research is an intellectual, creative, and rigorous craft that the practitioner not only learns but also develops. In order to understand what qualitative researchers do and the craft of this practice, we must first be able to distinguish qualitative research as a particular and distinct terrain. In order to do so we must compare and contrast the qualitative approach with its quantitative counterpart. While there are many theoretical and practical differences within the field of qualitative research, for the time being we assume the qualitative and quantitative approaches to be two different general points of view—two unique groundings, two different ways of asking questions, two
particular ways of thinking. Juxtaposing these conceptualizations of knowledge building also reveals a historical push-pull relationship between the qualitative and quantitative groundings. This back and forth struggle remains a dynamic component in researchers’ decision-making practices. By distinguishing between the qualitative and quantitative approaches, we will also begin to home in on the distinct contributions of qualitative research specifically related to our conceptions of knowledge and its creation. As we will show, the qualitative approach offers a whole new way of thinking about social reality.

In order to illuminate the difference between qualitative and quantitative research, an illustrative example may be helpful. After setting up an in-depth example, we will break down the differences in the quantitative and qualitative approaches, revealing the key assumptions and choices embedded within the example and how they reflect a historical struggle between seemingly disparate ways of knowing.

**QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF BODY IMAGE**

Quantitative research is often privileged as “hard” science. A quantitative researcher relies on numbers, rates, and percentages typically presented in a table, grid, or chart in order to communicate meaning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, p. 1). For illustrative purposes, let’s use body image as our research subject. A quantitative researcher might approach the study of body image and body dissatisfaction by constructing a survey consisting of multiple-choice questions, each with a finite number of possible responses (the Likert-type scale is often used). The survey, a quantitative instrument, would then be distributed to a preselected sample of respondents for completion. The researcher’s process is dependent on identifying a set of factors that “get at,” or measure, body image dissatisfaction and then constructing survey questions that elicit data on each identified body dissatisfaction indicator. The quantitative researcher might then display the survey data in the form of statistics on a chart or graph. The researcher’s interpretation is based on successfully identifying a set of variables that contribute to people’s body satisfaction.

For example, Banfield and McCabe sought to better define the term *body image* and obtain data on the particular dimensions of body image (2002, p. 373). In accord with their goals, they constructed two surveys designed to measure the four factors previously hypothesized to constitute body image (2002, p. 373). Based on their literature review they identified (1) perception, (2) affect, (3) cognition, and, (4) behavior as the four key dimensions of body image and their subsequent analysis was dependent on asking questions
aimed at accessing data about each of these four dimensions. The questions were compiled from 10 body image instruments that have been deemed valid (p. 375). The scale was closed-ended and relied on a Likert-type scale where respondents had five possible response choices. Banfield and McCabe presented the resulting data in several statistical tables.

A qualitative researcher would approach the topic of body image in very different ways. For example, a qualitative researcher might be interested in conducting in-depth interviews with college-aged women in order to better understand how they experience body image and the ways that their own body image identity has been shaped and now continues to shape their lives. In this circumstance, the researcher would ask a series of open-ended questions about the interviewee's self-image, such as how their self-image has developed, what they view as the significant cultural factors and social relationships that impact their body image, the locations and manifestations of pressures regarding physical appearance, their behavioral and emotional strategies for dealing with their body perception, and what they view as the fundamental factors in their own lives related to positive and negative body perceptions. In order to understand the meaning that the women attach to body image within their lived experiences, the researcher's point of origin is the perspective of the women being studied. In other words, the researcher seeks descriptive data from the research participants—they are the origin of the data and also to a large extent influence where the emphasis will be placed during data collection.

A qualitative researcher interested in studying how women of various racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds interpret body image and what they define as the key factors in their own relationships with their body identity and their social environment might consider conducting focus group interviews in order to explore the topic. As a part of a larger qualitatively driven body image study we have used focus groups and other qualitative interview methods in order to gain descriptive data on body image from the perspective of different groups, including female college students. Hesse-Biber (1995–1999) conducted one such focus group interview with local female college students in order to understand their body image issues and related aspirations, both in terms of their looks and the rest of their lives. After learning that being “beautiful/pretty” was important to several participants, she asked an open-ended follow-up question in order to gain greater understanding of what the respondents meant: “So what does it mean, do you think, to look pretty?” One participant, who must remain anonymous, responded as follows:

Yeah, when the final comes down to the whole point of my issue with eating, I think is that (A) I want to look like I’m so affected by glamour magazines and Vogue, and all that, because that’s a line of work I want to
get into. I’m looking at all these beautiful women. They’re thin. I want to be just as beautiful. I want to be just as thin. Because that is what guys like.

And I want guys to be attracted to me. And my final affirmation of how pretty I am, and how thin, and what a great body I have, is when guys look at me and what guys think. (Aspiration Codes Transcript, Hesse-Biber, p. 14)

As you can see, this data is detailed and guided by the respondent’s own interpretation and what she felt to be meaningful. A qualitative researcher might interpret this data by looking for themes grounded in the respondent’s words. This qualitative approach to interpretation requires the researcher to tend to the text and spend time with the respondent’s words in order to construct a critical theme that is derived from the perspective of the respondent. Qualitative researchers are concerned with text and words as opposed to numbers. Thus, qualitative researchers build and analyze themes embedded within transcripts they have helped create, such as, in the case of our focus group, data or pre-existing texts. This is because qualitative researchers are after meaning. The development of themes and thematic categories is a way qualitative researchers try to extract meaning from their data. Researchers think of these themes as “codes”—a concept which we will discuss in detail later. In terms of the transcript excerpt, the response, later coded as “wants to be beautiful” and “values thinness” (which are themes), reflects the respondent’s aspirations for weight and appearance as related to other assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations—she relates being “pretty” and thin to her career and romantic/relational desires. This data then has a depth of social meaning. This descriptive data, derived from the participant’s viewpoint, contextualizes the participant’s feelings about beauty/thinness in relation to her other aspirations. So, the qualitative approach produces meaning that does not result from the quantitative surveys.

The data yielded by focus groups, such as in the preceding example, could stand alone or could help shape intensive interview or oral history questions conducted on a one-on-one basis, both of which generate highly descriptive data and lead to understanding/meaning in a process-orientated way. A multimethod qualitative design like that yields both exploratory and descriptive data on the way personal body image is experienced and interpreted by those living with one. And, as we will discuss in more detail later in the book, the two research methods in this example don’t merely augment each other but also interact with and influence each other.

A qualitative researcher interested in examining the relationship between race and body image issues might conduct focus groups or in-depth
interviews in order to access data about body image from the viewpoint of the research participants. This is particularly important when studying the relationship between race and body image, because data on body image disturbance has traditionally been derived from white (middle and upper class) samples, resulting in a presumption that white middle and upper class females are the most vulnerable to poor body image and related issues such as eating disorders. If we imposed previously validated questionnaires on our research, the assumption that ethnic and racial minorities are protected from body image disturbance might be inaccurately reified. This is because those measurement instruments may ask questions that are indicators for the kinds of body image issues white girls and women have and may not ascertain the specific body image issues faced by women of other racial and ethnic groups. This was illustrated in focus groups conducted by Hesse-Biber, in which she found that young black girls had a range of different body image concerns than their white counterparts. Specifically, the black girls had many issues pertaining to their hair rather than the desire for thinness that usually plagues white girls (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004).

The quantitative researcher can also examine body dissatisfaction differences in terms of race and ethnicity; however, this dimension of their design would be based solely on stratifying their sample (the survey respondents) in terms of racial identification, which could be done by ascertaining general demographic information with the questionnaire. Molloy and Herzberger (1998) wanted to know how women’s body perception differs based on race and ethnicity. They hypothesized that black American women would be more satisfied with their physical appearance than white American women. In this vein, they surveyed one hundred and fourteen women from two community colleges and stratified their sample based on race, resulting in 45 black and 69 white respondents. The results supported their hypothesis that black women exhibited less body disturbance (of the kinds measured) than their white counterparts. Other examples of studies using survey data stratified on the basis of race, ethnicity, and gender, from which statistical data results, include: Abrams and Cook Stormer, 2002; Chamorro and Flores-Ortiz, 2000; Chandler, Abood, Lee, Cleveland, & Daly, 1994; Falconer and Neville, 2000; Nielsen, 2000. We caution you to be wary of the assumption that non white women are somehow protected from eating disorders and body dissatisfaction, as some scholars indicate that women of color may in fact be more vulnerable to body disturbance (Thompson, 1996). Likewise, since the majority of research on body image has been conducted on white samples, it is quite possible that new instruments are needed in order to understand how women of color experience body image and body disturbance. It may not be adequate to add women of color to these pre-existing models—exploratory
qualitative research may produce important insights into this as well. The following list shows, in a general way, the steps a qualitative researcher might follow as compared with a quantitative researcher.

Qualitative Model

1. Topical Area
2. Analyze Subset of Data
3. Generate Codes (Literal to Abstract)
4. Re-analyse Data; Analyze Additional Data
5. Memo Notes
6. Analyze Additional Data
7. Refine Codes; Generate Meta-Codes
8. Analyze Additional Data
9. Embodied Interpretation
10. Representation

Qualitative Model

1. Formulate a Research Question
2. Develop a Hypothesis
3. Define Variables
5. Coding
6. Sampling (Random Sampling)
7. Reliability and Validity Checks
8. Statistical Check (if necessary)
9. Calculate Results
10. Represent Results (typically on charts or graphs) [this is the last step and needs to be numbered]
When determining if your research project will engage with a quantitative or qualitative design (or a combination of the two), you must first ask:

- What is the primary research question?
- What part of social reality do I want to get at?

If you are interested in predicting and controlling numbers (those that indicate how many or how much) and/or the relationships between variables and any intervening factors (such as race), a quantitative design will yield the kind of data you are looking for. In other words, a quantitative approach is suited to answering the research questions as you have framed them. A quantitative approach answers what you want to know and what you think you can know. For example, a researcher interested in predicting whether, and to what degree, gender is a good indicator of eating disorder vulnerability, would ask: to what degree does gender predict eating disorder susceptibility? As we saw from the quantitative studies of body image, quantitative approaches are useful for identifying potential causal relationships, such as the link between gender and body image disturbance, while accounting for mediating factors such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class (if these dimensions are built into the research design). The nature of these relationships, and the social conditions from which these patterns flow, as well as individual agency and experience, may remain unknown in a solely quantitative study, however.

The comparative example of studying body image from a qualitative versus quantitative approach illustrates that qualitative research is about understanding social meaning while quantitative research focuses on patterns and predictability.

Most quantitative data techniques are data condensers. They condense data in order to see the big picture . . . Qualitative methods, by contrast, are best understood as data enhancers. When data are enhanced, it is possible to see key aspects of cases more clearly. (Charles Ragin, 1994, p. 92, as quoted by Neuman, 1997, p. 14–15)

In other words, quantitative research produces a quantity of data—generalizability—whereas qualitative researchers are after depth in their data and analysis rather than quantity. An overall difference between qualitative and quantitative research is already evidenced, so now we return to our illustrative body image research example in order to explore the assumptions, beliefs, and practices brought to bear by each approach. This discussion is situated in a historical discussion of positivism, the concept of objectivity, and the interrelated development of qualitative inquiry. In other words, we
explain how the body image research example shown from the quantitative and qualitative viewpoints actually reflects large-scale struggles over, and transformations within, the knowledge-building process.

**POSITIVISM, OBJECTIVITY, AND THE RESEARCH NEXUS: THE QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE APPROACHES**

The positivist view of social reality has historically dominated knowledge construction, and positivism is the epistemological basis of the quantitative paradigm—it was long seen as the only credible approach to inquiry, with its objective reliance on the “scientific method.” We will look at epistemology more generally and then address positivism and alternative models that have developed in opposition to the tenets of positivist epistemology.

Epistemology

Both the qualitative and quantitative approaches are infused with *epistemology* (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, p. 2). An *epistemology* is “a theory of knowledge” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Drawing on the work of Crotty (1998), Creswell elaborates on the preceding definition and says an epistemology is “a theory of knowledge embedded in a theoretical perspective” (2003, p. 4) which informs all aspects of the research process. In other words, an epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower and what can be known (Harding, 1987; Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). Beyond asking who can be a knower and what can be known, epistemology addresses how knowledge is created: an epistemological position lays the foundation for the knowledge-building process. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavor serve as the initial basis for an epistemological position. Actions within the research process are, like all human endeavors, influenced by previously held attitudes. We research what we believe to be knowable and in ways that we believe will be effective—both of which are reflections of our epistemological position.

For example, what the researcher assumes to be true or relevant about body image, what she or he assumes can be known, and what she or he wants to know about body image, are the foundation of an epistemology. Molloy and Herzberger believed there was a direct relationship between race and body disturbance vulnerability. This assumption, which developed into a hypothesis, guided all aspects of their research, including topic selection and
question formulation. Likewise, Hesse-Biber assumed that women attach multiple meanings to their body-related goals and feelings which can best be understood from their own vantage point, and this impacted all phases of her body image study. The researcher’s epistemological position will impact every aspect of the research process, including topic selection, question formulation, method selection, theoretical backdrop, and methodology. Some of the specific choices influenced include:

- Who will be included in the study of body image (gender, age, racial/ethnic diversity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status)?
- What aspect of body image are we trying to explain (sociocultural, economic, psychological, medical, behavioral, attitudinal, perceptual)?
- How will we attempt to get at the lived experiences related to our topic, and how will we make sense of and communicate the resulting knowledge?

If we are trying to measure causal relationships between demographic factors such as gender and race and the prevalence of eating disorders, we are asking a quantitative question which already bears several assumptions regarding the nature of social reality.

**Positivist Epistemology and Objectivity**

The epistemology through which quantitative practice developed as the model of “science” is important to understand. Positivist science holds several basic beliefs about the nature of knowledge, which together form positivist epistemology, the cornerstone of the quantitative paradigm. Positivism holds that there is a knowable reality that exists independent of the research process. The social world, similar to the natural world, is governed by rules, which result in patterns. Accordingly, causal relationships between variables exist and can even be identified, proven, and explained. Thus, patterned social reality is predictable and can potentially be controlled. This describes the nature of social reality from the positivist perspective. The quantitative approach to the study of body image can be understood as a manifestation of these assumptions: there is a knowable, predictable reality that exists “out there” constituted by clear causal relationships, such as patterned and predictable relationships between gender and race and multiple dimensions of eating disorder vulnerability identified as existing regardless of the research process and subsequently “tested” in our earlier example. So far we have been describing the nature of social reality according to positivism, but we
must go further to also examine assumptions about the relationship between that reality and the researcher who aims to explain it.

Positivism places the researcher and the researched, or knower and what is knowable, on different planes within the research process. The researcher and the researched, or subject and object, are conceptualized in a dichotomous model. Not only is there a rigid division between the subject and the object, but the division is also a hierarchical division in which the researcher is privileged as the knower. This is particularly important in the social sciences, where data is largely derived from human subjects who, under this framework, become viewed as objects for research processes: they are acted on by others—the knowers. For example, the surveys used to gather data in our quantitative example were given to human subjects who, in the positivist worldview, are transformed into knowable objects of inquiry.

The quantitative study of body image described in our survey-driven research example can be understood as a manifestation of positivism and its employment of the term “objectivity.” This is evidenced by the assumptions that (1) a knowable reality exists independent of the research process, such as causal links between gender and race and body dissatisfaction, and, (2) the division between the subject and object is a necessary part of the discovery of knowledge, as seen by the researcher constructing and then uniformly distributing questionnaires to research participants. Positivism has a particular view of “objectivity,” which is infused into the research process during all phases of it, whether on conscious or subconscious levels. Positivist epistemology assumes that there is an objective reality “out there” which can be explained by objective value-free researchers through the use of objective replicable methods. In other words, reality is objective and can be empirically studied/tested by value-neutral researchers. Researchers, like respondents, are then easily replaced for the purposes of replicating research. The researcher is assumed to be unbiased, emotionless, and non-political during knowledge construction. This conception of knowledge, particularly the implications of this kind of reliance on objectivity, has generated resistance from the research community from the outset, culminating in the growing field of qualitative research.

Alternative Ideas About the Nature of Social Reality

Early on, the hermeneutic tradition, more commonly referred to as the interpretive perspective, developed as a direct challenge to positivist epistemology and its interpretation/application of objectivity. The interpretive epistemology is based on the interpretation of interactions and the social meaning that people assign to their interactions (Nielsen, 1990, p. 7). This
perspective epistemologically believes that social meaning is created during interaction. The implication is that different social actors may in fact understand social reality differently, producing different meanings and analyses. Moreover, this perspective on knowledge building is based on observational and interactional ways of knowing. Research of this kind involves the building of relationships between the researcher and research participants, who are collaborators in the research process. Reciprocal relationships between subjective participants (both the researcher and the researched) were not always considered a part of interpretive practice. Schutz (1967, 1974) pioneered the interpretive perspective, and, while he legitimized the idea that human action could not be understood devoid of the meaning attached to it, he nonetheless endorsed a positivist subject-object split by urging researchers to “bracket” their subjectivity while engaged in research (Nielsen, 1990, p. 8). Feminists as well as critical theorists, as we discuss in more detail later, challenged this notion of “bracketing” and developed new models of knowledge building based on subjectivity, reciprocity, and process.

The hermeneutic perspective combats the positivist notion of objectivity in several ways, each of which reflects a different conception of knowledge construction. Social reality is not conceived of as “out there” waiting to be discovered and measured, but rather it is relational and subjective, produced during the research process. The researcher is not assumed to be value-neutral and “objective” but rather an active participant, along with the research subjects, in the building of descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory knowledge. Likewise, the value of the research is not based on whether it is replicable, but rather on how it adds to our substantive knowledge on a particular subject. The interpretive tradition developed in opposition to the assumptions of positivism and continues to offer strong resistance against positivist conceptions of the research endeavor. This is an example of how there has always been resistance to positivism and the quantitative approach it fuels based on epistemological grounds. Research conducted from the interpretive perspective produces qualitative results in the form seen in the body image focus group data. The problem for researchers who do not subscribe to positivist assumptions is that their research is often devalued. The data produced by the quantitative study of body image was generalizable and replicable and claimed to identify key causal relationships between sociocultural factors and body dissatisfaction vulnerability. This data is often popularly referred to as “hard” and “scientific,” giving it a sense of legitimacy within research and academic communities. The descriptive data yielded from the qualitative focus groups would typically be characterized as “soft” and therefore less “scientific.” Likewise the quantitative data is assumed to be “generalizable” to larger populations and thus “representative.” By contrast, qualitative data such as that seen from our focus group transcripts is often
referred to as “representational” or “constructed,” which implies it is less scientific and therefore less rigorous and less important. These stereotypical hierarchical ways of thinking about qualitative research in relation to quantitative research should be recognized and avoided. The longstanding bias which favors positivism over other ways of knowing, and its implications for qualitative researchers, will become clearer when we look at methods of data collection. For now let’s look at the qualitative approach in terms of its epistemological options.

Qualitative knowledge is produced from a variety of rich perspectives on social reality. While they share attentiveness to interpretation, they also focus on different aspects of social reality, such as women’s perspectives, conflict, popular culture, and so on. For example, feminist perspectives often focus on the social, cultural, and economic status of women locally and globally. Postmodern perspectives are frequently applied to the qualitative study of popular culture and mass media, while those working from critical perspectives are likely to focus on the micropolitics of power in a variety of politically charged contexts. We will discuss these perspectives in more detail later in this chapter, but for now it is important to understand that the qualitative approach is enriched by multiple traditions beyond the umbrella interpretive approach. These traditions include positivism, postpositivism, interpretive, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, feminist, postmodern, post-structural, postcolonial, critical, and standpoint. Qualitative research is an exciting and unique terrain in part because it is characterized by a diverse range of epistemological positions and thus asks many kinds of social scientific questions, both questions previously addressed in other ways and those not asked before, and it asks old questions in new and complex ways. As seen by the body image focus group transcripts, qualitative research allows for “thick descriptions” of social life (Geertz, 1973) compared to the generalizable but often flat data produced by quantitative surveys. As we saw by comparing positivism to the interpretive perspective, not only does epistemology address assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the knower, but it also addresses assumptions about the relationship between the knower and what can be known, or put differently, the researcher and subject of the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 201). When deciding whether your body image study will use a qualitative approach, you must give serious weight to what the nature of the relationship will be between the researcher and the research participants within the study. Will the relationship be based on a hierarchical division between researcher and researched, as prescribed by positivism, or will it be based on a reciprocal relationship built through rapport, such as is prescribed by the interpretive tradition, or will it take some other configuration? An analysis of positivism and its alternatives shows that these choices are not made arbitrarily but rather they
are intimately linked to belief systems about how human beings produce knowledge through varied degrees and forms of interaction—this guiding belief system is the bedrock of an epistemology.

Epistemology and Theory

As Creswell explains (2003), an epistemology is embedded within a theoretical perspective. We could also say that an epistemology is tied to or intimately linked to a theory, or, that epistemological beliefs are enacted through a theoretical frame. In general terms, theory is an account of social reality or some component of it that extends further than what has been empirically investigated, such as body image dissatisfaction (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, p. 3). Social theory is always a part of the research process. Theory is particularly important in the practice of qualitative research because generating, building, and refining theory is one of its prime goals. The empirical data collected during a specific study can be generalized to larger social phenomena through the building of social theory. Qualitative researchers do not just use theory, they also create it. Our focus group data on body image is an example of how thematic coding and analysis can lead to theory creation. In that instance, after extracting themes from the transcript, we had several themes that seemed to relate to a larger theme concerning aspirations and body image. It was there that theory developed, as we used our empirical data to derive larger statements about the relationships between a range of personal aspirations and body disturbance vulnerability.

Researchers apply theory throughout the research process, and their theoretical perspective is linked with their epistemological beliefs. Research, in a general sense, can be conducted using a deductive or inductive approach. Whether a project relies on deductive or inductive logic is directly linked to how theory is conceived of and used in it, and whether new theory is generated. Deductive approaches are typically used in positivist quantitative research and involve testing theory.

In quantitative studies, one uses theory deductively and places it toward the beginning of the plan for a study. With the objective of testing or verifying a theory rather than developing it, the researcher advances a theory, collects data to test it, and reflects on the confirmation or disconfirmation of the theory by the results. The theory becomes a framework for the entire study, an organizing model for the data collection procedure . . . The researcher tests or verifies a theory by examining hypotheses or questions derived from the theory. (Creswell, 2003, p. 125–126)
This is very different from the inductive approaches to research that are typically used by qualitative researchers. Qualitative researchers are interested in generating theory. With this in mind, qualitative researchers often rely on inductive models where the theory develops directly out of the data. One such model often used by interpretive and feminist researchers (though not exclusively or uniformly) is grounded theory. While we discuss this in more detail later in the book when we consider approaches to analysis and writing, under this approach theory develops directly out of the empirical data. In other words, by using the narratives produced in interviewing, ethnography, or texts (in the case of content analysis), qualitative researchers who use inductive approaches use the empirical data to develop larger theories about social life that emerge from the people who experience the aspect of social reality being studied. These issues will be fleshed out later. However, for now it is important to understand the key difference between testing and generating theory or deductive versus inductive ways of knowing, as these basic research models have multiple implications for the nature of knowledge itself. The relationship between theory and epistemology is perhaps best illustrated through a research example.

For example, if we were to study the relationship between patriarchal capitalist culture and body disturbance among girls and women, we might employ a radical feminist theoretical perspective. This theoretical framework involves a critique of patriarchy as the source of physical and other forms of “violence” against girls and women—including patriarchal beauty standards (Ritzer, 2000, p. 462). In other words, this theoretical perspective assumes a general relationship between women’s oppression and contemporary beauty standards that reflect and are otherwise tied to patriarchal capitalist interests (Hesse-Biber, 1996). A feminist epistemological position would likely be guiding and shaping the employment of this radical feminist theoretical frame. This means that we bring certain assumptions to bear on the project, including the notion that it is possible to know the relationship between macro patriarchal practices and body image disturbance as experienced on both macro and micro levels of analysis. Furthermore, we assume that women can be knowers, women’s concerns can be the locus of analysis, and, social reality is already mediated by patriarchal and capitalist ways of seeing the world, which must be brought to light and diffused. This becomes clearer in Chapter 2 when we discuss “paradigms” or “worldviews.”

Methods as Research Tools

When people talk about research, the focus is very often on methods of data collection; however, research methods are intimately linked to
epistemology and theory. Qualitative researchers have been at the forefront of explicitly acknowledging and engaging with the link between method and theory, as opposed to disavowing it. Methods are the tools that researchers use in order to gather data. These techniques for learning about social reality allow us to gather data using individuals, groups, and, multimedia texts as our sources. Sandra Harding defines research methods in the following way:

A research method is a technique for... gathering evidence. One could reasonably argue that all evidence-gathering techniques fall into one of the three categories: listening to (or interrogation) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records. (1987, p. 2)

Qualitative researchers often use one or more of the following methods (though this is not an exclusive list): ethnography, in-depth interviewing, oral history, autoethnography, focus group interviewing, case study, discourse analysis, and content analysis. As you can see, qualitative researchers employ a diverse range of methods, making the possible research topics and questions as vast as our imaginations. The quantitative approach lends itself to a different set of research methods, which are typically: experiments, surveys/questionnaires, evaluation, content analysis, and statistical analysis. Since the quantitative approach is based on positivist assumptions (though researchers of other epistemological positions, including feminism, also use quantitative designs), methods of measurement are appropriate to this epistemological and theoretical belief system, which guides method selection and implementation. Accordingly, these are the methods which allow for hypothesis testing and ultimately produce quantitative numerical results. Some researchers might label qualitative and quantitative methods in stereotypical ways. Thinking back to our body image research comparison, the quantifiable data produced from the surveys might be called scientific, reliable, representative, valid, and objective. The descriptive focus group data might likewise be called soft, relational, situated, partial, and subjective. As you can see, all of these adjectives make qualitative methods seem less important than quantitative methods. The long-standing hierarchy that has been created which places quantitative research above qualitative research is often based on the research methods used and the kind of data they generate. Quantitative instruments of measurement are simply assumed to be rigorous, and, accordingly, data resulting from their use takes on the presumption of validity. Open-ended and thematic qualitative methods of interview, observation, and content analysis are dichotomously assumed to lack validity in their pursuit of depth and authenticity. It is important to bear in mind that our concept of “validity” developed in direct relation
to positivist science, which serves as the yardstick by which validity is measured. Qualitative approaches have problematized our very conceptions of legitimacy, though a longstanding hierarchy remains an issue. The privileging of positivism has created tremendous pressure for researchers to conform to the more accepted traditional research model. Researchers seeking funding may find out quickly that positivist quantitative research is more often funded, funded at higher amounts, and more likely to be published in top-tier peer-reviewed journals than qualitative research. These material realities are then coupled with how a qualitative researcher’s work is regarded within their academic institution and among peers in the discipline. Together, these mechanisms of privileging quantitative research and rewarding researchers who conform to the validated model create very real pressure-infused environments in which qualitative researchers must operate. Our discussion of validity will continue in Chapter 2.

Although multiple methods may be used for a variety of reasons, qualitative researchers dealing with the external pressures that encourage quantitative research may use *multimethod approaches* as a way of combining qualitative and quantitative methods. For example, Madeline Altabe (1998) combined quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to study the relationship between ethnic diversity and body image disturbance. If a researcher is using qualitative methods for *triangulation* or *confirmation*, often the quantitative data will become privileged if there is a discrepancy between the quantitative and qualitative results and they appear to be incongruent. Having said this, qualitative research is distinct in that it often uses multiple methods within the context of one research project to ask and answer complex research questions. In addition to combining qualitative and quantitative techniques, multiple method designs may gain qualitative data in various forms. It is important to bear in mind that multimethod designs, in their best execution, do not simply rely on more than one method of data collection for the sake of yielding “more data” per se. When multiple methods are used, the methods interact with each other and inform the research process as a whole. Qualitative researchers who are engaged in a holistic approach to knowledge building are particularly cognizant of this. Additionally, multimethod designs help us to frame new research questions that would not otherwise be possible. Likewise, multimethod projects help us to ask questions previously posed in new and often more far-reaching ways. Some multimethod designs may even constitute the development of an emergent method.

Methodology: A Bridge Between Theory and Method

Epistemology, theory, and method web to create what we refer to as the *research nexus*; however, theory and method together also have a unique
and important relationship within the research process. It is in methodology that theory and method come together in order to create a guide to, and through, research design, from question formulation through analysis and representation. Harding explains that a methodology is a theory of how research does or should proceed (1987, p. 3). Methodology is the bridge that brings theory and method, perspective and tool, together. It is important to remember that this is a bridge that the researcher travels throughout the research process. In other words, methodology fuses theory and method, serving as a strategic but malleable guide throughout the research experience. In terms of malleability, methodology can be altered during research to the extent the researcher’s epistemological beliefs allow for modification. A researcher’s conception of subjectivity and objectivity within the research process is likely to influence whether or not they will be open to revising their methodology once data gathering has begun.

Feminist scholar Ingrid Botting (2000) conducted a study on domestic servants from the 1920s and 1930s who migrated to a mill town in Newfoundland for work. She twice modified her project based on the accessibility of data as well as her early findings, which prompted a reconfiguration. Botting’s experience illustrates how important reflexivity is in the research process as well as the holistic and process-driven nature of qualitative inquiry (her study combined oral histories and census data). Through a rigorous process of reflection, Botting was able to “listen to the data,” as we say, and follow it so that, in the end, like many feminist qualitative researchers, she was able to create a research design where the data was best able to “speak.”

Figure 1.1 Methodology: A Bridge Between Theory and Method
While there are research methods that generally yield qualitative data, such as oral history, in-depth interviewing, and ethnography, many research methods, such as content analysis, can be employed in both qualitative and quantitative ways. And as our discussion of multimethod approaches showed, qualitative researchers often use research methods that generate quantitative data. Moreover, theoretical perspectives are neither qualitative nor quantitative by nature, as evidenced by quantitative researchers who employ a feminist perspective or feminist empiricists who follow a positivist orientation. Feminists utilize the full range of research methods available, including surveys, which typically produce quantitative results. We will now elaborate on the contributions of feminism and other perspectives to the richness, diversity, and increased acceptance and practice of qualitative research. Moreover, we will show how varied approaches to qualitative practice all uniquely conceptualize research as a holistic process and have expanded our ideas about knowledge building.

**HOLISTIC CONCEPTIONS OF KNOWLEDGE BUILDING: QUALITATIVE PERSPECTIVES**

So far we have been discussing qualitative research under the umbrella of an interpretive tradition and only alluding to and referencing variations in qualitative practice. While qualitative research is generally conducted from an inductive approach and aims at extracting social meaning, understanding social processes, and generating theory, there are many perspectives from which qualitative research is conducted. These perspectives and approaches vary tremendously, offering social scholars a range of ways to engage in qualitative research as well as diverse ways to think about knowledge and its production.

**Postpositivism**

Typically, qualitative research is associated with interpretive, feminist, and critical perspectives and not the positivist and postpositivist perspectives from which quantitative researchers operate; however, there are instances of researchers working from positivist and postpositivist approaches in qualitative practice. We have already discussed the tenets of positivism, so now we will briefly discuss postpositivism as an atypical approach for qualitative researchers.

*Postpositivism* is very similar to positivism, the difference being that, when studying social reality, postpositivism recognizes that researchers cannot be
absolutely positive about their knowledge claims (Creswell, 2003, p. 7). Getting away from the positivist idea of proving causal relationships that constitute the social world, postpositivists build evidence to support a pre-existing theory. In other words, relying on deductive logic and hypothesis testing, just like positivists, postpositivists attempt to create evidence that will confirm or refute a theory, though not in absolute terms. In sum, postpositivism assumes that there is an objective reality “out there” constituted by testable cause and effect relationships. Social reality thus exists independent of the researcher and research project. Relying on deductive logic, these researchers engage in measurement and hypothesis testing in order to create evidence in support of, or against, an existing theory. You can see, given the assumptions about reality and knowledge construction, that this perspective is more congruent with quantitative analysis; however, some qualitative researchers may also choose to work from this kind of theoretical framework.

Qualitative researchers generally work from under the interpretive umbrella (a term we are using loosely), although this does not mean researchers follow the hermeneutic tradition per se. As we have already discussed the interpretive tradition, we will now talk about other major theoretical perspectives that fall under a more interpretive framework and tend to examine the social world as socially constructed. In particular, we will discuss the contributions of ethnomethodology, phenomenology, feminism, and critical theoretical perspectives to the domain of qualitative research. These approaches have significantly contributed not only to qualitative research but also to our conceptions of social reality, knowledge, and knowledge production. These are far-reaching highly expansive theoretical and epistemological positions with many variations within them. Therefore, as an introduction to these approaches, we will speak primarily in general terms. Please bear in mind that the use of generalizations means that a lot of nuance, difference, and tension within these perspectives will be left out of our discussion. For a more in-depth discussion of these topics, please refer to our book *A Feminist Research Primer* (Sage).

**Phenomenology**

*Phenomenology* has its roots in the eighteenth century, partly as a critique of positivism. Phenomenologists were critical of the natural sciences for assuming an “objective” reality independent of individual consciousness. Phenomenology is closely associated with European philosophy in the early 1900s, most notably the works of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Husserl, 1913 [in German], translated in 1931; see also: Heidegger) and...
French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1996). Husserl was interested in human consciousness as the way to understand social reality, particularly how one “thinks” about experience. In other words, *how consciousness is experienced*. For Husserl, consciousness is always “intentional,” that is, it is directed at some phenomenon. To understand how consciousness operates enables us to capture how individuals create an understanding of social life. Husserl was especially interested in how individuals consciously experience experience. How is it that we become aware of experiences? Alfred Schutz (1967), a colleague of Husserl, brought the phenomenological perspective to American sociology. He was particularly interested in how individuals process experience in their everyday lives. Phenomenology is not only a philosophy but also a research method for capturing the lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenologists are interested in such questions as:

- How do individuals experience dying? (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
- How does one experience depression? (Karp, 1997)
- How does one experience divorce? (Kohler-Riessman, 1987)

For the phenomenologist, there is no “one reality” to how each of these events is experienced. Experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions: How the experience is lived in time and space and vis-à-vis our relationship to others as well as to bodily experience. Phenomenologists use a variety of methods, including observation, in-depth interviewing, and examining written accounts of experiences found in materials such as diaries. The type of question that might come up in an interview situation regarding one of the experiences listed above would be:

- Can you tell me what it is live to live with depression (impending death, divorce)?

In sum, phenomenology is a theoretical perspective aimed at generating knowledge about how people experience things.

Ethnomethodology

*Ethnomethodology* draws on the phenomenological perspective and is related to phenomenology in that both focus on the process whereby individuals understand and give a sense of order to the world in which they live. Ethnomethodologists are particularly interested in how meaning is negotiated in a social context through the process of interaction with
Ethnomethodology was popularized as a perspective in the field of sociology in the 1960s through the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodologists ask such questions as:

- How do people go about making sense of their everyday lives?
- What are the specific strategies, especially those that appear to be commonsensical, that individuals use to go about the meaning-making process?

To the ethnomethodologist, social life itself is created and recreated based on the micro understanding individuals bring to their everyday “social contexts.” Ethnomethodologists utilize a range of methods to go about capturing this process of meaning making that can range from observing individuals in natural settings as they go about their daily rounds, to participant observations, to interviews. Ethnomethodologists are especially interested in how individuals engaged in interaction talk about their experiences, asking:

- How is meaning created in the everyday conversations individuals have with each other?

As you can see, this theoretical tradition lends itself to qualitative methods of inquiry. In other words, the main theoretical tenets of ethnomethodology are congruent with the methods of observation and interview that dominate qualitative practice.

FEMINIST THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Feminist perspectives developed as a way to address the concerns and life experiences of women and girls, who, due to widespread androcentric bias, had long been excluded from knowledge construction both as researchers and research subjects. The history of correcting male-centered bias in the research process, and thus including women in social scientific research, is important and interesting; however, it is peripheral to the focus of this text. The minuscule version is that eventually women were included in the research process, though the research process itself remained unchallenged. Over time, researchers working from a feminist standpoint came to realize that adding women to pre-existing frameworks, such as positivism, replicated traditional knowledge production, only now with women—at least numerically—including (for an in-depth discussion of this topic, please see our book A Feminist Research Primer). This is where our conversation about feminism and qualitative research merges with the historical progression.
Many feminists began to question the nature of knowledge construction itself, invariably realizing that new substantive concerns and related research questions (women-centered) necessitated new ways of thinking about and engaging in research. In this vein, some feminists began to challenge the main epistemological assumptions on which positivism rests. These initial challenges led to an unraveling of the dominant paradigm and multiple subsequent transformations in what is considered knowable and how we come to know.

In general terms, feminism challenges the dichotomous thinking that dominates positivism and then provides alternative ways of thinking about social reality and, correspondingly, the research process. Feminists critique the subject–object split as a false dualism that is inherently flawed, artificial, and ultimately undesirable. The feminist critique of the subject–object split has its roots in earlier feminist efforts to expose and correct the exclusion of women from research in the social and natural sciences. Halpin (1989) importantly links traditional scientific objectivity to a general process of “othering,” in which women, people of color, and sexual minorities have been deemed “other” and as a result treated as inferior to the traditional white heterosexual male scientist. This process has resulted in systematic “scientific oppression” (Halpin, 1989). A key dimension to this historical routinized exclusion/distortion has been the placing of the researcher on a higher plane than the research participants because the researcher is conceptualized as the knowing party (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). Feminism itself has emerged from this historical struggle and seeks to create contextualized and partial truths and avoid the absolutes that have historically oppressed women and other marginalized peoples. In other words, feminists generally reject the positivist and postpositivist “view from nowhere” assumed by traditional scientific “objectivity,” in favor of creating a “view from somewhere” (Sprague & Kobrynowicz, 1999)—that is, an engaged view.

This is not to imply that feminists do not grapple with complex issues related to objectivity within the research process. In fact, feminism has not simply called into question our assumptions about “objectivity” but has offered exciting new ways to think about it, adding greatly to research perspectives and practices. Many researchers aim not at abandoning objectivity but rather at transforming it into “feminist objectivity” (Bhavani, 1993; Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1993).

Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges. (Haraway, 1988, p. 581)

This means that feminists seek to engage with pure objectivity, while simultaneously acknowledging its impossibility, based on the fact that all research is conducted within a social context.
Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting the subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn to see. (Haraway, 1988, p. 583)

Dismantling a dichotomous view of objectivity and subjectivity, feminist objectivity places the two in a dialectical relationship lived throughout the entire research process (Hesse-Biber, et al., 2004). Sandra Harding (1993) has been at the forefront of this discussion.

Harding’s position is that it is not the positivist notion of objectivity that is problematic, but rather the limited application of “objectivity” within the actual research process. This is a prime example of the kind of holistic thinking that we believe characterizes and distinguishes qualitative research. Harding coined the term “strong objectivity” as a means of urging researchers to apply objectivity and reflexivity throughout the research process. By reflexivity we mean the ongoing questioning of one’s place and power relations within the research process. Historically, Harding explains, objectivity (whether inherently flawed itself or not) has only been applied to the context of justification. This refers to a justification, provided by the researcher, as to how research subjects were sampled or selected, methods were employed, measurement tools were validated, and so forth, but not why. By using objectivity strongly, Harding advocates the rigorous application of objectivity and critical reflexivity during the context of discovery as well. This means that when we select our topic, create our initial research questions, construct our design, and move through data collection, analysis, and representation, we must not disavow the subjectivity (emotions, politics, and, standpoint) that we each bring to bear on our research, but rather own it, disclose it, and critically engage with it. Harding’s significant contribution to our understanding of objectivity–subjectivity throughout the research process is meant to serve as one example of variation and contribution within the larger intellectual exchange about objectivity that is a part of feminism.

Linked to the more general feminist rejection of the subject–object split that we were discussing is the feminist critique of the rational–emotional division, which, like the subject–object split, is a fundamental component of positivism and even of later postpositivist frameworks. Again, not only is the rational–emotional split artificial, but it is also undesirable to many researchers. This may be particularly true for feminists who have a commitment to improving the life chances of women and girls both locally and globally. In other words, feminists are centrally concerned with social justice, and, as a result, social activism, changes in social policy, and other politically imbibed aspirations impact their work during all phases of the process (from topic selection to final representation). As Alison Jaggar (1989) and Sprague and Zimmerman (1993) explain, emotions often serve as the impetus for a
research project. This was true in the case of our research on girls and body image, which developed out of our political and scholarly commitment to women’s issues and our personal experiences with female students who live in a cultural pressure cooker. Likewise, in the case of qualitative research such as ethnography, reciprocal emotional relationships may be an important and necessary data source (Bailey, 1996). In this same vein, Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) advocates a multifaceted “ethic of caring” for the engaged researcher. The necessarily political nature of feminist research, as well as any research centrally concerned with hearing the voices of those silenced, oth- ered, and marginalized by the dominant social order, such as the work done by queer theorists and those working from multicultural frames, makes the concept of “value-free” or “value-neutral” research irrelevant on all levels. And so new social concerns not only call into question the legitimacy of the dominant epistemological position but also expose a need for new ways of thinking about knowledge and the research process. Given this general and abridged feminist critique of positivism and postpositivism, the reasons for the use of qualitative research methods as primary or supplemental methods by large numbers of feminist researchers is clear. Generally speaking, the assumptions within and kinds of questions answerable with qualitative methods of inquiry are congruent with the feminist principles held by many. Specifically, qualitative methods of interview and observation necessitate reciprocal relationships where researchers and research participants are placed on the same plane in the research process. Likewise, qualitative methods require the researcher to be deeply engaged with the data in order to extract meaning, understand process, and modify the project as appropriate (if they are willing to do so). For example, in the case of our body image focus group data, during the process of data collection it became clear to the interviewer (Hesse-Biber) that the black girls had different issues of central importance to them than the white respondents interviewed earlier. By being critically engaged with the emerging data, she was able to get at what was important in the lives of her respondents. Qualitative research methods lend themselves to this kind of reflexive engagement because they yield exploratory, descriptive, and process-oriented data instead of attempting to prove or corroborate hypothesized causal relationships. Qualitative methods ask not only “what is it?” but, more importantly, “explain it to me—how, why, what’s the process, what’s the significance?” These questions are answered through holistic and reflexive engagement on all levels. Having said all of this, there are numerous differences within the feminist paradigm. While a broad discussion of these positions is available in our feminist companion to this text, for now we will briefly discuss feminist standpoint epistemology as one feminist perspective from which many qualitative researchers work.
Derived from Hegel’s master–slave dialectic, and Karl Marx’s subsequent scholarship, Dorothy Smith (1974) and Nancy Hartsock (1983) pioneered feminist standpoint epistemology. In essence, standpoint epistemology (which has evolved into a methodology as well) is based on the assumption that in a hierarchically structured social world, different “standpoints” are necessarily produced. For example, the United States has a long history of involvement in genocide and slavery and continued racial inequality. This constitutes an environment that is hierarchically structured along economic, social, and political lines based on the construct of race and/or ethnicity. In such a context people have different visions of the world based on the racial categorization that they embody and their corresponding space in the social structure, which, as implied, is hierarchical and thus differentiated.

Feminist standpoint theorists have primarily focused on the position that women occupy within a social context characterized by a patriarchal sex-gender system. Women and men occupy different social positions (even more complicated by race, class, and sexuality) that produce different life experiences, differential access to the economic, cultural, and political reward system, and, thus, ultimately different standpoints. Some standpoint theorists argue that women’s vision is not only different but in fact more complete and less distorted because they occupy a position of oppression in which they must come to understand their own social position as well as that of the dominant group (Hartsock, 1983; Jaggar, 1989).

Drawing on Marx’s class analysis, Nancy Hartsock explains that the differential material (economic and work) conditions under which men and women live produce radically different standpoints. In such a situation, not only do men and women have different viewpoints but quite literally different experiences in the private and public spheres, which provide substantive research material for scholars as well as a new way of approaching research.

Women’s work in every society differs systematically from men’s. I intend to pursue the suggestion that this division of labor is the first and in some societies the only division of labor, and moreover, that it is central to the organization of social labor more generally. On the basis of an account of the sexual division of labor, one should be able to begin to explore the oppositions and differences between women’s and men’s activity and their consequences for epistemology. (Hartsock, 1983, p. 154)

By looking at the conditions under which differential standpoints are produced, such as the division of labor in both the public and private
spheres, it becomes clear that standpoint is an achievement—you earn it through your life experiences. We earn our unique and engaged vision through our material and symbolic realities.

Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) has added immeasurably to our understanding of standpoint as an epistemology and critical methodology by introducing the idea of an *Afrocentric feminist epistemology* that begins with the unique standpoint of black women. In essence, Hill-Collins explains that we live in a “matrix of domination” where race and gender are overdetermined in relation to each other, producing a unique standpoint fostered by these “interlocking systems of oppression.” By accessing the different standpoints within our social world, researchers are able to ask and answer new questions and challenge and even resist former conceptions of truth and ways of knowing.

Alternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic process used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating truth. The existence of a self-defined Black women’s standpoint using an Afrocentric feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth. (Hill-Collins, 1990, p. 205–206)

And so we can see that standpoint epistemology provides a new way of thinking about both social reality itself and the way we can approach studying that reality. Likewise, feminism is a particular standpoint that is earned through politically engaged practice, making the practice of feminist research itself an achievement.

**Critical Perspectives**

Like feminist perspectives, *critical approaches* to knowledge construction are numerous, with many variations in epistemology, theory, substantive concerns, and methodological designs that inform qualitative research. Having said this, we will provide a brief and very general overview of some
of the key issues and beliefs that critical theorists bring to knowledge construction. These perspectives are revisited and elaborated on in Chapter 8, where we discuss unobtrusive methods.

Critical theorists reject the main tenets of positivism and explain that the assumptions within positivism and the historical practice of this epistemological position have maintained radically unequal power relations. They are particularly wary of notions of absolute Truth and base their concerns on the historical inequities produced by this rigid view of knowledge. The traditional scientific process ultimately creates knowledge that is used to maintain (justify, fortify, reconstruct) the status quo, in which all those forced to the peripheries of the social system (women, people of color, sexual minorities, and the lower socioeconomic classes) are continually oppressed through the reproduction of the hierarchical dominant ideology. Critical theory seeks to reflexively step outside of the dominant ideology (insofar as possible) in order to create a space for resistive, counterhegemonic, knowledge production that destabilizes the oppressive material and symbolic relations of dominance. Critical theorists seek to access “subjugated knowledges” and often examine the “micro-politics of power” (Foucault, 1976). There are many variations under the larger umbrella of critical theory. Postmodernism has developed into one of the main epistemological traditions within the broader umbrella category and is now practiced widely. We will now break down some of the tenets of critical scholarship, focusing primarily on postmodern epistemology (though many of the scholars we mention have been categorized in different ways—as poststructuralists and deconstructionists, for example).

Postmodern and related theories focus on the prominence of dominant ideology and the discourses of power that normalize this ideology to the maintenance of a dominant world order—locally, nationally, and globally. In particular, the discursive logic that accompanies the postmodern capitalist system is investigated. Frederic Jameson, who has contributed immeasurably to the development of postmodern theory, explains that we must examine the “cultural logic of late capitalism” (also called postmodernity) which is both a moment and a discourse (Jameson, 1991). Antonio Gramsci (1929) explains that people partly consent to their own oppression through the internalization of dominant ideology. In other words, hegemonic authority is maintained because, as Foucault (1976) would say, our ideas become the chains that bind us best. Being social creatures, our ideas are not simply created in our minds, but are rather a part of a larger social and political context with its own materiality. The project of critical scholarship thus becomes accessing the voices of the oppressed and their unique knowledges, which Foucault labels subjugated knowledges, in order to transform power relations. Since all knowledge is produced within shifting fields of power
(Foucault, 1976), research must be historically engaged (Bhavani, 1993). One method of pursuing this politicized intellectual project is **critical deconstruction**. During a discussion of the oppression of women within the symbolic and material realms, critical feminist scholar Luce Irigaray posits deconstruction as follows:

> It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of a discourse while remaining *within* the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence . . . the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory . . . but of *jamming the theoretical machinery itself*, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. (Irigaray, 1977, 1996, p. 78, italics added)

As you can see, critical theory is concerned with creating transformational tension within the social system itself, rather than producing knowledge that feeds the system. In this vein, critical scholar Jacques Derrida (1966), who was at the forefront of changing how researchers think about knowledge and its production, urges a method of critical deconstruction where what has been marginalized through social historical processes is transformed into the locus of investigation (this is elaborated in Chapter 8). Postmodern research is thus a process of de-centering in order to create situated knowledges that challenge dominant ideology. This is necessarily an **engaged** process. Pierre Bourdieu (1992) puts forward “reflexive sociology” as a necessary epistemological and practical part of the research process.¹

For me, sociology ought to be meta but *always vis-à-vis itself*. It must use its own instruments to find out what it is and what it is doing, to try to know better where it stands. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 191)

Researchers use many terms to signify the importance of reflexivity in postmodern practice, including *power-reflexive* (Haraway, 1991) and *power-sensitive* (Pfohl, 1992). Bhavani (1993) touches on a similar theme by explaining that it is not enough merely to recognize the “micro-politics of the research situation,” we must also analyze them (p. 74).

Postmodern scholars are often criticized for being too “relative” because they reject the idea of “objective” reality and assert that all knowledge is produced within socially and historically specific power relations, making it socially constructed and thus partial (Nielsen, 1990, p. 9). Let’s analyze this critique in order to demonstrate one of the key points of critical theory itself. In fact, this often repeated “relativist” criticism of critical scholarship, and more specifically postmodern theory, *must* itself be analyzed from a critical
perspective in order to be understood. This is because postmodernism is not broken down from within its own philosophical positioning, but rather based on the conventional deductive logic of positivism. The foundation of the critique is therefore curious. It is a situation whereby postmodern research is being judged by the tenets of positivist conceptions of science—objectivity, reliability, generalizability, validity. These categories of scientific judgment, however, have been destabilized by postmodern principles, and thus a postmodern researcher would argue that the assumptions that have historically created and reified those standards of measurement have come to take a place of prominence out of a power-imbued and distorted process. The critique is distorted and irrelevant because the foundation on which the critique is based remains the product of dominant ideology—which is what postmodern theory seeks to challenge, resist, and transform.

Additionally, many positivist, postpositivist, interpretive, and feminist estimations of postmodern knowledge production go on to assert that not only does this stance produce unreliable relative truths, but that in its attempt to create partial truths (which of course postmodernists argue all truths are even if they are not disclosed as such), postmodern theory has created an array of disconnected “truths.” Generally speaking, this criticism is problematic because postmodern researchers aim at creating embodied truths that are not disconnected from the historical material realities that produced them. In this way, while postmodern research is often thought of as antithetical to empiricism, knowledge produced from a postmodern approach is quite grounded in ongoing historical processes and the power–knowledge relations in which it is enmeshed.

GETTING BACKSTAGE: THEORY, METHOD, AND EPISTEMOLOGY IN PRACTICE

The purpose of this chapter has been to introduce you to the field of qualitative research. In order to differentiate qualitative practice as a unique and fruitful terrain, we have compared it to its quantitative counterpart using real-world research examples about the study of body image. Likewise, in the latter portion of the chapter we have introduced, in broad terms, some of the main epistemological and theoretical approaches qualitative researchers employ. Theories and methods can be employed in many different ways, so our position is that what really distinguishes qualitative research as a unique perspective on knowledge building is that it is a holistic and engaged process. We hope that you are starting to see why. In the next chapter we discuss some of the issues that begin to emerge during research design, including how a
qualitative researcher selects a topic and then begins to think about creating a methodological design that fits their research questions. This discussion is situated within an exploration of “paradigms” or “worldviews.”

In the following chapters we also hope that you will begin to see how multifaceted and complex the actual practice of qualitative research is. In this vein, we have included “Behind-the-Scenes” boxes in each of the following chapters. These sections contain material we have solicited from respected scholars in the field of qualitative research. These sections are meant to introduce you to the practice of social research—what it is really like to work with particular methods and methodologies from the point of view of researchers. Rarely do we get to see some of the complexity in conducting research unless we are actively engaged in the process ourselves. Through these behind-the-scenes glimpses into various phases of the research endeavor, you will be introduced to the inner workings of how scholars put a project together. In this chapter we have discussed the link between method, methodology, and epistemology. But what is the connection between these aspects of research in actual practice? As qualitative research has dismantled the notion of the “view from nowhere” and replaced it with a “view from somewhere,” how does a researcher’s standpoint impact various aspects of their research? By going behind the curtain of the research project, we will be able to get into the researcher’s standpoint (so to speak) as they enter their research project. We will be introduced to the range of issues, motivations, and values brought to bear on their research. This backstage view will help link the theory of qualitative research with the actual practice of social research, ultimately providing a more holistic view of the qualitative endeavor.

GLOSSARY

Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology: Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) has added immeasurably to our understanding of standpoint as an epistemology and critical methodology by introducing the idea of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology that takes the premise of standpoint epistemology and begins with the unique standpoint of black women.

Context of Discovery: This refers to the construction of a research topic and research questions and how we design and implement research projects. According to Sandra Harding (1993), when we select our topic, create our initial research questions, construct our design, and move through data collection, analysis, and representation, we must not disavow the subjectivity (emotions, politics, and standpoint) that we each bring to bear on our research, but rather own it, disclose it, and critically engage with it.
Context of Justification: This refers to a justification, provided by the researcher, as to how research subjects were sampled or selected, methods were employed, measurement tools were validated, and so forth, but not why (which is accounted for in the context of discovery).

Critical Approach: Critical theory seeks to reflexively step outside of the dominant ideology (insofar as possible) in order to create a space for resistive, counterhegemonic knowledge production that destabilizes oppressive material and symbolic relations of dominance. Critical theorists seek to access “subjugated knowledges” and often examine the “micro-politics of power” (Foucault, 1976).

Critical Deconstruction: Since all knowledge is produced within shifting fields of power (Foucault, 1976), research must be historically engaged (Bhavani, 1993). One method of pursuing this politicized intellectual project is critical deconstruction, an approach developed by Jacques Derrida (1966).

Deductive Approach: Typically used in positivist quantitative research, deductive approaches begin with a hypothesis which is then tested.

Epistemology: A theory of knowledge; “a theory of knowledge embedded in a theoretical perspective” (Creswell, 2003, p. 4) which informs all aspects of the research process. In other words, an epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower and what can be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). Beyond asking who can be a knower and what can be known, epistemology addresses how knowledge is created: an epistemological position lays the foundation for the knowledge-building process. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavor serve as the initial basis for an epistemological position.

Ethnomethodology: Ethnomethodology draws on the phenomenological perspective and is related to phenomenology in that both focus on the process whereby individuals understand and give a sense of order to the world in which they live. Ethnomethodologists are particularly interested in how meaning is negotiated in a social context through the process of interaction with others. Ethnomethodology was popularized as a perspective in the field of sociology in the 1960s through the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodologists ask such questions as: (1) How do people go about making sense of their every day lives? (2) What are the specific strategies, especially those that appear to be commonsensical, that individuals use to go about the meaning-making process? To the ethnomethodologist, social life itself is created and recreated based on the micro understanding individuals bring to their everyday “social contexts.” Ethnomethodologists utilize a range of methods to go about capturing this process of meaning making that
include observing individuals in natural settings as they go about their daily rounds, participant observations, and interviews.

**Feminist Perspectives:** Feminist perspectives developed as a way to address the concerns and life experiences of women and girls, who, due to widespread androcentric (sexist) bias, had long been excluded from knowledge construction both as researchers and research subjects.

**Feminist Standpoint Epistemology:** Standpoint epistemology is based on knowing a society from within. This means that groups differentially located in the society will have different experiences and thus earn a unique perspective. Feminist standpoint theorists have primarily focused on the position that women occupy within a social context characterized by a patriarchal sex-gender system.

**Hermeneutic Tradition:** See Interpretive Perspective.

**Hierarchical:** Division in the relationship between the researcher and the researched in which the researcher is privileged as the knower.

**Holistic:** The practice of qualitative research is reflexive and process-driven, ultimately producing culturally situated and theory-enmeshed knowledge through an ongoing interplay between theory and methods, researcher and researched. By *holistic* we mean that researchers must continually be cognizant of the relationship between epistemology, theory, and methods and look at research as a process.

**Inductive Model:** A model in which theory develops directly out of the data; one such model often used by interpretive and feminist researchers (though not exclusively or uniformly) is grounded theory.

**Interpretive Perspective:** This perspective developed as a direct challenge to positivist epistemology and its interpretation/application of objectivity. The interpretive epistemology is based on the interpretation of interactions and the social meaning that people assign to their interactions (Nielsen, 1990, p. 7). This perspective epistemologically believes that social meaning is created during interaction and people’s interpretations of interactions. The implication is that different social actors may in fact understand social reality differently, producing different meanings and analyses. Research of this kind involves the building of relationships between the researcher and research participants who are collaborators in the research process.

**Methodology:** It is in methodology that theory and method come together in order to create a guide to, and through, research design, from question
formulation through analysis and representation. Harding explains that a methodology is a theory of how research does or should ensue (1987, p. 3). Methodology is the bridge that brings theory and method, perspective and tool, together. It is important to remember that this is a bridge that the researcher travels throughout the entire research process. In other words, methodology fuses theory and method, serving as a strategic but malleable guide throughout the research experience.

**Multimethod Approach:** This is when a researcher uses more than one method in a research project. Researchers can combine qualitative methods or use qualitative and quantitative methods in conjunction with one another. Ideally, the methods should speak to the research question and to each other.

**Phenomenology:** Phenomenology has its roots in the eighteenth century, partly as a critique of positivism. Phenomenologists were critical of the natural sciences for assuming an “objective” reality independent of individual consciousness. Phenomenology is not only a philosophy, but also a research method for capturing the lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenologists are interested in such questions as: (1) How do individuals experience dying? (Kubler-Ross, 1969) (2) How does one experience depression? (Karp, 1997) (3) How does one experience divorce? (Kohler-Riessman, 1987) For the phenomenologist there is no “one reality” to how each of these events is experienced. Experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions—how the experience is lived in time, in space, vis-à-vis our relationships to others as well as as a bodily experience. Phenomenologists use a variety of methods, including observation, in-depth interviewing, and looking at written accounts of people’s experiences in materials such as diaries.

**Postmodernism:** Postmodern and related theories focus on the prominence of dominant ideology and the discourses of power that normalize this ideology to the maintenance of a dominant world order—locally, nationally, and globally. Postmodernism argues that we have moved beyond modernity into a postmodern era characterized by a focus on reproductive technologies. This new epoch requires new approaches to knowledge construction.

**Postpositivism:** Postpositivism is very similar to positivism—the difference being that in the study of social reality, postpositivism recognizes that researchers cannot be absolutely positive about their knowledge claims (Creswell, 2003, p. 7). Getting away from the positivist idea of proving causal relationships that constitute the social world, postpositivists build evidence to support a pre-existing theory. In other words, relying on deductive logic.
and hypothesis testing, just as positivists do, postpositivists attempt to create evidence that will confirm or refute a theory, though not in absolute terms.

**Positivist Epistemology:** Positivism holds that there is a knowable reality that exists independent of the research process, and it can be discovered and tested through objective means and a neutral researcher.

**Reflexivity:** The ongoing questioning of one’s place and power relations within the research process.

**Research Methods:** Methods are the tools that researchers use in order to gather data. A research method is a technique for gathering evidence. One could reasonably argue that all evidence-gathering techniques fall into one of the three categories: listening to (or interrogation of) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records (Harding, 1987, p. 2). Qualitative researchers often use one or more of the following methods (though this is not an exhaustive list): ethnography, in-depth interviewing, oral history, autoethnography, focus group interviewing, case study, discourse analysis, and content analysis.

**Research Nexus:** The “webbing” together of epistemology, theory, and method.

**Situated Knowledges:** Often produced by feminists who reject the idea of provable truths, situated knowledges are partial truths that are located in particular contexts.

**Standpoint Epistemology:** This is based on the assumption that in a hierarchically structured social world, different “standpoints” are necessarily produced. By accessing the different standpoints within our social world, researchers are able to ask and answer new questions and challenge and even resist former conceptions of truth and ways of knowing. In a hierarchical social order our standpoints are earned viewpoints.

**Theoretical Perspective:** An epistemology is embedded within a theoretical perspective, meaning that an epistemology is tied to or intimately linked to a theory, or, that epistemological beliefs are enacted through a theoretical frame.

**Triangulation:** The use of three research methods.

**Validity:** Researchers working within the qualitative paradigm conceptualize validity differently than traditional positivist conceptions of the term. Generally speaking, validity is one of the issues researchers address as they make a case or argument for the knowledge they have produced. In other words, that the knowledge produced reflects some aspect of the social world and/or is compelling.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to conceptualize the research process holistically? How does this perspective impact the production of knowledge?

2. Qualitative researchers seek meaning; what does approaching a topic with the goal of generating meaning do to the process, the interpretation, and the final result?

3. In what ways does the researcher’s epistemological position influence the methods used?

4. How does the hierarchical division produced by the positivism of researcher-researched (subject/object) impact the research process?

5. Discuss objectivity and subjectivity and their importance in the research process. How do different theoretical and epistemological perspectives conceptualize objectivity and subjectivity?

6. What is the research nexus and how does it impact knowledge building?

7. How can reflexivity enrich one’s data and the interpretative process?

SUGGESTED WEBSITES

Forum: Qualitative Social Research

http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs/fqs-eng.htm

FQS is a peer-reviewed multilingual online journal for qualitative research. The main aim of FQS is to promote discussion and cooperation among qualitative researchers from different countries and social science disciplines.

Association for Qualitative Research

http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aqr/

This site is useful because, although the most recent month’s publication is not free on the website, all previous publications are. Students can access full texts.
Qualitative Research Consultants Association

http://www.qrca.org/

This website is for a nonprofit organization whose mission is promoting excellence in qualitative research. Site is useful for those who are interested in becoming part of an organization dealing with qualitative research.

The Association for Qualitative Research

http://www.aqrp.co.uk/

Anyone who is interested in qualitative research is welcome to join this association. Founded in the early 1980s, AQR is a recognized and respected organization in the marketing services arena.

The Qualitative Research Report

http://www.nova.edu/sss/QR/qualres.html
http://www.nova.edu/sss/QR/web.html

Leading on-line qualitative research journal with many additional sources about qualitative research.

The National Organization for Women

http://www.now.org/

This is an up-to-date website containing information about feminist research as well as feminist issues. It has an up-to-date link to current events dealing with feminism as well as legislative updates.

The Feminist Majority Foundation (Research Center)

http://www.feminist.org/research/1_public.html

This website contains a plethora of information dealing with women’s issues and, in particular, feminist research. It has links to current research,
women’s studies programs, feminist journals, feminist Internet search utilities, women research centers, and feminist magazines.

The Feminist Institute for Studies on Law and Society

http://www.sfu.ca/~fisls/engines.htm

This website has a link focusing specifically on feminist research as well as a broader subject guide. It also contains links to feminist journals and papers, along with a list of feminist search engines.

Sociological Research Online

http://www.socresonline.org.uk/2/3/3.html

This is a link to a specific journal article about feminist research and the authors’ experience with feminist research. Miller talks about such things as the power in the search process, power in the research relationship, as well as personal experiences with feminist research. Methodologies and feminist epistemologies are also discussed.

NOTE

1. He was writing specifically about sociology; however, we believe he would extend his position out to include all social scientific research, if not all research itself.

REFERENCES


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Irigaray, L. (1985). This sex which is not one. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.


