

with providing illustrative examples that we can continue to curtail such practices. Case study research has experienced growing recognition during the past 30 years, evidenced by its more frequent application in published research and increased availability of reference works (e.g., Thomas, 2015; Yin, 2014). Encouraging the use of case study research is an expressed goal of the editors of the recent *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Engaging researchers are a focus of a number of publications aimed at guiding those new to the approach (e.g., Baxter & Jack, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Comparing the Five Approaches

All five approaches have in common the general process of research that begins with a research problem and proceeds to the questions, the data, the data analysis and interpretations, and the research report. Qualitative researchers have found it helpful to see at this point an overall sketch for each of the five approaches. From these sketches of the five approaches, we can identify fundamental differences among these types of qualitative research. Finally, we compare the five approaches relating the dimensions of foundational considerations (Table 4.1), data procedures (Table 4.2), and research reporting (Table 4.3).

In Table 4.1, we present four dimensions for distinguishing among the foundational considerations for the five approaches. At a most fundamental level, the five differ in what they are trying to accomplish—their foci or the primary objectives of the studies. Exploring a life is different from generating a theory or describing the behavior of a cultural group. A couple of potential similarities among the designs should be noted. Narrative research, ethnography, and case study research may seem similar when the unit of analysis is a single individual. True, one may approach the study of a single individual from any of these three approaches; however, the types of data one would collect and analyze would differ considerably. In *narrative research*, the inquirer focuses on the stories told from the individual and arranges these stories often in chronological order; in *ethnography*, the focus is on setting the individuals' stories within the context of their culture and culture-sharing group; in *case study research*, the single case is typically selected to illustrate an issue, and the researcher compiles a detailed description of the setting for the case. Our approach is to recommend—if the researcher wants to study a single individual—the narrative approach or a single case study because ethnography is a much broader picture of the culture. Then when comparing a narrative study and a single case to study a single individual, we feel that the narrative approach is seen as more appropriate because narrative studies *tend* to focus on a single individual whereas case studies often involve more than one case. The process of developing research question(s) can often be helpful for determining the suitability of the research problem for a specific approach. Moreover, although overlaps exist in discipline origin, some approaches have single-disciplinary traditions (e.g., grounded theory originating in sociology, ethnography founded in anthropology or sociology), and others have broad interdisciplinary backgrounds (e.g., narrative, case study).

TABLE 4.1 ● **Contrasting Foundational Considerations of Five Qualitative Approaches**

Foundational Considerations	Narrative Research	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Case Study
Research focus of approach	Exploring the life of an individual	Understanding the essence of the experience	Developing a theory grounded in data from the field	Describing and interpreting a culture-sharing group	Developing an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases
Unit of analysis	Studying one or more individuals	Studying several individuals who have shared the experience	Studying a process, an action, or an interaction involving many individuals	Studying a group that shares the same culture	Studying an event, a program, an activity, or more than one individual
Type of research problem best suited for approach	Needing to tell stories of individual experiences	Needing to describe the essence of a lived phenomenon	Grounding a theory in the views of participants	Describing and interpreting the shared patterns of culture of a group	Providing an in-depth understanding of a case or cases
Nature of disciplinary origins	Drawing from the humanities including anthropology, literature, history, psychology, and sociology	Drawing from philosophy, psychology, and education	Drawing from sociology	Drawing from anthropology and sociology	Drawing from psychology, law, political science, and medicine

The approaches employ similar data collection processes, including, in varying degrees, interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials (see Table 4.2). The differences are apparent in terms of emphasis (e.g., more observations in ethnography, more interviews in grounded theory) and extent of data collection (e.g., only interviews in phenomenology, multiple forms in case study research to provide the in-depth case picture). At the data analysis stage, the differences are most pronounced. Not only is the distinction one of specificity of the analysis phase (e.g., grounded theory most specific, narrative research less defined) but the number of steps to be undertaken can vary (e.g., extensive steps in phenomenology, fewer steps in ethnography).

The research reporting of each approach, the written report, takes shape from all the processes before it (see Table 4.3). Stories about an individual's life comprise

TABLE 4.2 • **Contrasting Data Procedures of the Five Qualitative Approaches**

Data Procedures	Narrative Research	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Case Study
Forms of data collection	Using primarily interviews and documents	Using primarily interviews with individuals, although documents, observations, and art may also be considered	Using primarily interviews with 20 to 60 individuals	Using primarily observations and interviews but perhaps collecting other sources during extended time in field	Using multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts
Strategies of data analysis	Analyzing data for stories, “restoring” stories, and developing themes, often using a chronology	Analyzing data for significant statements, meaning units, textual and structural description, and description of the “essence”	Analyzing data through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding	Analyzing data through description of the culture-sharing group and themes about the group	Analyzing data through description of the case and themes of the case as well as cross-case themes

narrative research. A description of the essence of the experience of the phenomenon becomes a phenomenology. A theory, often portrayed in a visual model, emerges in grounded theory, and a holistic view of how a culture-sharing group works results in an ethnography. An in-depth study of a bounded system or a case (or several cases) becomes a case study. The general structures of the written report may be used in designing a journal-article-length study. However, because of the numerous steps in each, they also have applicability as chapters of a dissertation or a book-length work. We discuss the differences here because the reader, with an introductory knowledge of each approach, now can sketch the general “architecture” of a study within each approach. Certainly, this architecture will emerge and be shaped differently by the conclusion of the study, but it provides a framework for the design issues to follow. For each approach, the introduction describes the particular focus of the research and common across the approaches, the introduction tends to familiarize the reader to the research problem and research question(s). The research procedures are subsequently outlined, often including a rationale for use of the approach and details related to the data procedures for the study.

Note the unique organizing framework related to each approach and specifically the variations in how the research outcomes can be presented. Providing in-depth

TABLE 4.3 ● **Contrasting Research Reporting of Five Qualitative Approaches**

Research Reporting	Narrative Research	Phenomenology	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Case Study
Introduction of written report	Focusing on participant(s) and nature of the story	Focusing on explaining the phenomenon	Focusing on the process (or action) that the theory is intended to explain	Focusing on the culture-sharing group being studied	Using entry vignette and then focusing on central features of the case
Description of research procedures	Stating the rationale, significance of individual to experiences, and data procedures	Stating the rationale, philosophical assumptions, and data procedures	Stating the rationale and data procedures	Stating the rationale, type, and data procedures	Stating the rationale, type, and data procedures
Organization of research outcomes	Telling stories using a variety of ways involving restorying, theorizing, and narrative segments	Reporting how the phenomenon was experienced using significant statements and discussing meaning of themes	Developing theory involving open coding categories, axial coding, selective coding, theoretical propositions, and a model	Describing the culture and analyzing patterns of cultural themes with verbatim quotes	Providing first extensive description of the case followed by key issues (themes or issues) in the case
Concluding format	Interpreting patterns of meaning	Describing the “essence” of the experience	Advancing a theory and	Describing how a culture-sharing group works using a cultural portrait	Making case study assertions and advancing a closing vignette

descriptions is common across all the approaches, but how the descriptions are organized varies; whereas narrative research might use a chronology for telling stories, a phenomenology may use significant statements as the organizing structure for reporting how the phenomenon was experienced. Similarly, how a research report concludes also varies by the approach; whereas it is common practice for a closing vignette in a case study, a cultural portrait is commonly used in an ethnography referring to overall interpretations, lessons learned, and questions raised representing the essence. These structures should be considered as general templates at this time. In Chapter 5, we will examine five published journal articles, with each study illustrating one of the five approaches, and further explore the writing structure of each.