CHAPTER 1

An Invitation to Qualitative Research

In recent years, binge drinking has caused considerable concern among administrators at colleges and universities, compelled by statistics that show marked increases in such behavior. A qualitative researcher studying this topic would seek to go behind the statistics to *understand* the issue. Recently, we attended a faculty meeting that addressed the problem of binge drinking and heard concerned faculty and administrators suggest some of the following solutions:

- stricter campus policies with enforced consequences
- more faculty-student socials with alcohol for those over 21 years old
- more bus trips into the city to local sites such as major museums to get students interested in other pastimes

Although well-intentioned, these folks were grasping at straws. This is because although they were armed with statistics indicating binge drinking was prevalent and thus could identify a problem, they had no information about *why* this trend was occurring. Without understanding this issue on a meaningful level, it is difficult to remedy. At this point, we invite you to spend 5 to 10 minutes jotting down a list of questions you think are important to investigate as we try to better understand the phenomenon of binge drinking at college.

What Is Qualitative Research?

The qualitative approach to research is a unique grounding—the position from which to conduct research—that fosters particular ways of asking questions and particular ways of thinking through problems. As noted in the opening discussion of binge drinking in college, the questions asked in this type of research usually begin with words like *how, why,* or *what.* Look at the list of questions you generated—what words do they begin with? As we asked you to think about

understanding this topic, you likely framed your questions from a qualitative perspective or approach. Qualitative researchers are after meaning. The social meaning people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as the meanings people embed into texts and other objects, are the focus of qualitative research. Therefore, at the heart of their work, qualitative researchers try to extract meaning from their data. The focus of research is generally words and texts as opposed to numbers (as is the case in quantitative/statistical research). 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 through practice.

Qualitative research is an exciting interdisciplinary landscape comprising diverse perspectives and practices for generating knowledge. Researchers across departments in the social and behavioral sciences use qualitative methods. In addition, the research process itself, also referred to in this book as the knowledge-building process, takes center stage in qualitative research. This means that researchers are very attentive to all aspects of the research process, including the conceptualization of the project, the interconnections between each phase of the research process, and the effect the researcher has on the process. Therefore, we advocate a *holistic approach* to qualitative research, which uses a process-oriented approach to knowledge-building. To understand what we mean by a holistic approach, it is necessary to first understand the major dimensions of research.

Dimensions of Qualitative Research

There are many important aspects of research aside from methods, although college-level courses are often misleadingly called "research methods" instead of "research practice." The major dimensions of research are ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods. Each dimension impacts how a research question is formulated, how a project is conceptualized, and how a study is carried out. Furthermore, ontological and epistemological positions invariably inform methodological and methods choices.

Ontology: An **ontology** is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality—what can be known and how. For example, is the social world patterned and predictable, or is the social world continually being constructed through human interactions and rituals? These assumptions represent two very different ontological perspectives. A researcher's ontological assumptions impact topic selection, the formulation of research questions, and strategies for conducting the research.

Epistemology: An **epistemology** is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). The researcher's ontological and epistemological positions form the *philosophical basis of a research project.* This philosophical foundation impacts every

aspect of the research process, including topic selection, question formulation, method selection, sampling, and research design.

Methodology (theoretical perspective) is an account of social reality or some component of it that extends further than what has been empirically investigated. Our methodological perspective is always a part of the research process.

There are three major methodological approaches in qualitative research: (1) post-positivist, (2) interpretive, and (3) critical. Post-positivism posits that the social world is patterned and that causal relationships can be discovered and tested via reliable strategies. The interpretive position assumes the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions, and thus, social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning-making activities. Critical perspectives also view social reality as an ongoing construction but go further to suggest that discourses created in shifting fields of social power shape social reality and our study of it. These approaches are reviewed in-depth in Chapter 2.

There are two primary approaches to using theory: deductive and inductive. A **deductive approach**, which is emphasized in post-positivism, tests theory or a hypothesis against data. An **inductive approach,** which is usually emphasized in interpretive and critical belief systems, generates theory directly out of the data. These approaches can also be linked and are discussed further in Chapter 3.

Methods: Methods are the tools that researchers use to collect data. These techniques for learning about social reality allow us to gather data from individuals, groups, and texts in any medium. Sandra Harding (1987) 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 interrogating) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records. (p. 2)

Qualitative researchers often use one or more of the following methods (although this is not an exhaustive list): ethnography or field research, interview, oral history, autoethnography, focus group interview, case study, discourse analysis, grounded theory, content or textual analysis, visual or audiovisual analysis, evaluation, historical comparative method, ethnodrama, and narrative inquiry. The diversity of the methods with which qualitative researchers work is one of the distinguishing features of the qualitative landscape, which makes for a vast range of possible research topics and questions. Put differently, qualitative researchers have a lot of tools in their toolboxes. So, how does a researcher select a research method?

When selecting a research method or methods for a particular project, it is most important to have a tight fit between the purpose or question and the method

selected. Different tools are better suited to different projects, just as in life. For example, it is advisable to have a hammer, screwdriver, and wrench in one's toolbox. It is also advisable to know when to use them, which depends entirely on the particular problem at hand. Some researchers tend to become comfortable with a particular method or set of methods, and this can lead to a misalignment of research goals and the methods selected to achieve those goals. To select a method arbitrarily without considering carefully what kind of data you are seeking is to the put the cart before the horse, so to speak. We encourage new researchers to work with a variety of methods so that they will feel comfortable selecting appropriate methods for future projects.

The researcher's methodological (theoretical) and method choices form the *design framework* for a research project. The combining of theory and methods determines the methodology for a given study.

A Holistic Approach to Research

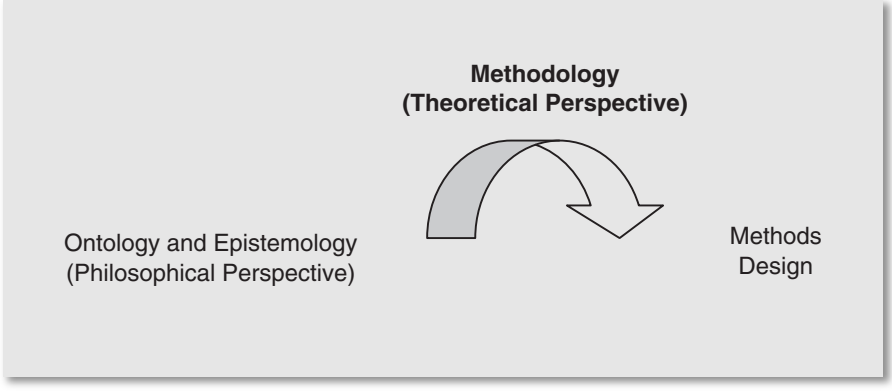
Methodology is the bridge that brings our philosophical standpoint (on ontology and epistemology) and method (perspective and tool) together. It is important to remember that the researcher travels this bridge throughout the research process.

Our methodology serves as a strategic but malleable guide throughout the research experience. In terms of malleability, methodology can be altered during research to the extent to which a researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs allow for modifications. Researchers' 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 commenced.

You may be wondering: why would researchers need to be open to changing their methodology once a project has begun? Sometimes no matter how much forethought we put into our research design plans, *the practice of research* gets complicated, and one of the following scenarios occurs: Unforeseen issues arise that make the strategy difficult to work with; we may realize our methodology needs to be revised—as well as our methods design. For example, we may find that once our study is put into practice; we are not eliciting the data we are interested in; or the data we are gathering suggest something unexpected that prompts a reexamination of our study. A qualitative grounding allows for the revision of a methodology as warranted if the researcher's philosophical belief system promotes this kind of fluidity. For example, Botting (2000) used oral history as a way to understand the experiences of a particular group of working women in the 1920s and 1930s. Specifically, she was interested in domestic servants who had migrated from coastal communities to a mill town in Newfoundland for employment

purposes. She used oral history as a way to understand the experiences of both migration and domestic work for that group of female workers, who at the time represented a large proportion of women workers in that area. This kind of research is essential in filling gaps in our current knowledge base of what it means to be a woman from a particular social class in a given time, place, and industry, from the woman's own perspective. In this way, previously excluded groups can share their valuable knowledge with us. Botting twice modified her project based on the accessibility of data as well as insights garnered from her early findings, which prompted a reconfiguration. Botting's experience illustrates how important reflexivity is within the research process as well as the 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, she, like many qualitative researchers, was able to create a research design that best allowed significant data to emerge.

Figure 1.1 Methodology: A Bridge Between Philosophical Framework and Methods Design



Our approach to the qualitative endeavor is **holistic.** A holistic approach is attentive to the important connections between the philosophical framework and method(s) employed (see of Figure 1.1). A holistic approach explicitly integrates ontology, epistemology, methodology, and method, and can be thought of as a nexus—the research nexus. In other words, a holistic approach requires researchers not to disavow their underlying belief systems but rather to examine how their ontological and epistemological perspectives impact methodology. Therefore, a holistic approach views research as a process rather than an event. In this regard, adopting a holistic approach means the researcher views all research choices, from topic selection to final representation, as

interrelated. This differs from an event-oriented approach, which views choices as a set of sequential steps. Throughout this book you will learn that this kind of holistic approach is successful in diverse research contexts and provides rewarding experiences for researchers who craft their own projects. In addition, it is not just the resulting information or research findings that we learn; the process itself becomes a part of the learning experience. In this regard and others, qualitative approaches to social inquiry foster personal satisfaction and growth.

Quantitative Research and Positivism

Qualitative research approaches represent one of the two major paradigms (worldviews) from which social research is conducted. Quantitative research represents the other paradigm. Although we hope the research community is moving past polarizing views of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, comparisons are frequently drawn.

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, like 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 (see Table 1.1).

For example, the quantitative approach to the study of binge drinking can be understood as a manifestation of these assumptions: A knowable, predictable reality exists "out there," constituted by clear causal relationships, such as patterned and predictable relationships between the enforcement of campus drinking policies and students' binge drinking patterns; this exists regardless of the research process and can be subsequently "tested." So far, we have been describing the nature of social reality according to positivism, but we must go further to examine assumptions about the relationship between that reality and the researcher who aims at explaining it. It should be noted that quantitative approaches can also employ qualitative methods.

Positivism's methods practices place the researcher and researched, or knower and what is knowable, on different planes within the research process. The researcher and 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 it is also a *hierarchical* division in which the researcher is privileged as the knower. This is particularly important in the social sciences, where data are largely derived from human subjects who, under this framework, become viewed as objects for research processes: They are acted on by others—the knowers.

Table 1.1 A Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Models of Research

Qualitative "Inductive" Methods Model	Quantitative "Deductive" Methods Model
Topical area	Formulate a research question
Analyze subset of data	Develop a hypothesis
Generate codes (literal to abstract)	Define variables
Reanalyze data; analyze additional data	Construct measurement instrument
Memo notes	Coding
Analyze additional data	Sampling (random sampling)
Refine codes; generate meta-codes	Reliability and validity checks
Analyze additional data	Statistical check (if necessary)
Embodied interpretation	Calculate results
Representation	Represent results (typically on charts or graphs)

What Kinds of Questions and Problems Can Be Addressed With Qualitative Methods?

Qualitative approaches to research typically use qualitative "inductive" methods (see Table 1.1). This means projects frequently begin with the accumulation of specific data, the analysis of which leads to a more general understanding of the topic. Therefore, guiding research questions are generally open-ended, allowing for a multiplicity of findings to emerge. Research questions typically begin with words like *why, how* and *what*. For example, consider the following sample questions:

- How might some people with a racial minority status experience prejudice in their workplace? In what ways does this occur? How does this make people feel? How does this impact work productivity? How does this impact professional identity?
- Why do many working women experience struggles to balance work and family? What is the nature of these struggles? How do working women cope with these challenges? What are the differences between working fathers' experiences and those of working mothers? What, if any, are the differences between white and minority women?
- How do people experience divorce? What does the process entail on an emotional level? What does it mean to uncouple? How does this impact self-concept?
- Why do students binge-drink? In what contexts do they binge-drink? What kinds of atmospheres promote binge drinking? How is binge drinking experienced differently by male and female students? What is the relationship between self-esteem and binge drinking in college-age students?

The framing of research questions is linked to the research purpose in a particular study. There are three primary research purposes: (1) exploratory, (2) descriptive, and (3) explanatory. *Exploratory research* seeks to investigate an area that has been underresearched. The data garnered is preliminary data that helps shape the direction of future research. *Descriptive research* seeks to describe the aspect of social reality under investigation. Qualitative researchers conducting descriptive research are typically after what Clifford Geertz (1973) termed "thick descriptions" of social life from the perspective of those being studied. *Explanatory research* seeks to explain social phenomena and the relationship between different components of a topic. This kind of research addresses the "why" of social life.

Table 1.2 Research Purposes

Exploratory[a]	Descriptive	Explanatory
Seeks to investigate an underresearched aspect of social life	Seeks to richly describe an aspect of social life	Seeks to explain an aspect of social life

a. Some qualitative researchers refer to this as Discovery.

Illustrations of Qualitative Studies

Here we provide qualitative research examples that seek to explore, describe, and explain, respectively. These are meant only as illustrations to get you thinking about how a research purpose is linked to the formulation of research questions, which then informs our methods choices. The researcher standpoint also informs the formulation of research questions, which is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Exploratory

As noted in the opening of this chapter, binge drinking has recently become a topic of considerable conversation at U.S. colleges and universities and, accordingly, studies on this behavior have been conducted. Let's say we are interested in the experience of binge drinking specifically by minority students at predominantly white colleges. This is an underresearched topic so our study seeks to explore this topic and gain some preliminary insights into the key issues to help shape future research. These might be some of our research questions: Where do minority students "party" at predominantly white colleges? Do minority students attend predominantly white parties? If so, what is this experience like? What is the drinking environment like? In what contexts do the minority students engage in drinking? In what contexts do the minority students engage in excessive drinking? Is this a strategy of fitting in or coping with the pressures of being a minority in that context? If yes, how so? How does the minority students' drinking compare with the drinking of white students?

The best way to answer these questions is to gather data directly from the student population we seek to understand. We might, therefore, gather data through focus group interviews where multiple students are interviewed together. This provides responses to our initial questions, and the group dynamic is likely to bring the conversation into areas that we might otherwise not consider. Moreover, the participants can help guide us to select language that is appropriate to "get at" their experiences, about which we, at this point, know very little. Put differently, because there isn't much existing scholarship available about this topic that can help shape our research questions, we need to be open to learning unexpected information from our research participants. Alternatively, we might conduct an ethnographic study observing students in their social environments. This would allow us to observe people in their natural setting while we take in-depth notes based on our direct observations, and we could informally interview research participants.

Descriptive

Now let's say we are interested in understanding the experiences of military spouses coping with having their spouse serving in a war. For this study, we are interested in describing the experiences of military spouses, developing "thick descriptions" of the reality of the lives of people in this situation. These might be some of our research questions: How did you feel when your spouse was called to war? What did you do as a family to prepare for him/her to leave? What did you do individually to prepare? What are the hardest aspects of this experience? How has your daily life changed with your partner away? Describe the details of a typical day now. How has your parenting role changed with your partner away? What coping strategies do you use to deal with the worry, tensions, or pressure?

The best way to gather this kind of data is directly from the population in which we are interested. Given the sensitive nature of the topic as well as the in-depth data we are after, we might be interested in conducting in-depth interviews or oral history interviews that will lead to "thick descriptions."

Explanatory

Now let's say we are interested in explaining the relationship between college-age women's media consumption and their body image (the ways in which they think about their appearance, as well as their satisfaction or dissatisfaction). Based on our prior knowledge and assumptions, we are specifically interested in associations between media consumption, such as regular reading of women's fashion magazines, and poor body image. For this kind of project, we might choose a more structured approach to interviewing, where participants are asked a range of specific questions such as these: How do you feel about the way you look? What do you like about your appearance? What do you dislike? Why? How does that make you feel? What television programs do you watch? What do you like about them? Do you read magazines? Which ones? What do you think about the images you see?

How do they make you feel? Do you wish you looked more like the models? How so? If they make you feel bad, why do you continue to read them? Do you hang clips from magazines in your dorm? If so, why? How do you decide which clips to hang? How do you feel when you look at them?

As an alternative to structured interviews, we might be interested in a multimethods approach to this research. One way to do this would be to combine survey research designed to get a breadth of responses from college-age women with in-depth interviews aimed at getting a depth of data from fewer participants. Another approach would be to combine structured interviews with a content analysis of the images in a representative sample of women's magazines. This approach would allow us to examine both the images themselves and how our participants internalize those images.

In each of the three preceding examples, the general research purpose (to explore, describe, or explain) helped us to formulate specific research questions. The specific research questions, in turn, led us to select an appropriate method or methods—those that are best suited to address our questions. This illustrates the importance of having a "tight fit" between the research purpose, questions, and methods. Moreover, this is the beginning of research design in qualitative practice, which is reviewed at length in Chapter 3.

- What do these studies have in common?

Whether seeking to explore, describe, or explain, all of the preceding research examples share a commonality: They seek to unearth and understand meaning. Moreover, they are after social meaning from the perspectives of research participants who are enmeshed in their context. Qualitative research approaches can investigate how people assign meaning to their experiences as well as social events and topics. Furthermore, qualitative research examines how the meanings we assign to our experiences, situations, and social events shape our attitudes, experiences, and social realities.

What Do We Want You to Learn From This Book?

This book serves as a comprehensive introduction to the practice of qualitative research. In this vein, after reading the book, you should have answers to the following research issues: How do you conceptualize a problem? How do you formulate a research strategy and research design? How do you execute the plan, and what issues may arise? How do you make sense out of your findings? How do you write-up the findings? We hope that after reading this book, you will have a firm understanding of a qualitative research approach as a holistic process. We present a practice model of research that goes behind the scenes to show you the complexities that can occur when we seek to better understand the human condition. A practice model encourages the doing of research, understanding that even the best-laid plans may not hold up during the practice of research. In this vein, we are delighted to present behind-the-scenes boxes throughout the book. These boxes were written by leading researchers and take us behind the curtain to the real world of qualitative research, with its messiness, disappointments, ethical dilemmas, and unique joys. We hope that the book encourages critical questions along the way.

Glossary

Deductive approach: This approach begins with theories that are tested against new data.

Epistemology: An epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower. An epistemology includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participant(s) is understood.

Holistic: 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 approach: This approach begins with specific data out of which more general ideas or theories are generated.

Methodology: Methodology is a theory of how knowledge building should ensue. Methodology is the bridge that brings our philosophical framework together with our methods practice.

Ontology: An ontology is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality—what can be known and how. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavor serve as the initial basis for an ontological position.

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

Research method: Methods are the tools that researchers use to gather data. A research method is a technique for gathering evidence.

Theory: Theory is an account of social reality or some component of it that extends further than what has been empirically investigated.

Discussion Questions and Activities

1. What is a qualitative approach to research? How are qualitative approaches different from quantitative?

2. Compare and contrast a qualitative "inductive" methods model with a quantitative "deductive" methods model.

3. What kinds of problems can qualitative research address?

4. Select a possible research topic (perhaps using an example from this chapter such as binge drinking among college-age students). Next, create sample research questions in order to conduct exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research on your topic.

Resources

Suggested Web Sites

Qualitative Research

http://carbon.cudenver.edu/~mryder/itc_data/pract_res.html

This Web site, produced by the University of Colorado (Denver), contains links to resources that explain the art of qualitative educational research: critiques, literature reviews, research design methodologies, and other articles.

The Qualitative Report (online journal)

http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/index.html

Publishes qualitative research articles and book reviews across the disciplines. Also features "The Weekly Qualitative Report," which highlights current research articles, reviews resources, and includes relevant job postings, conferences, links, and so forth.

Relevant Journals

International Journal of Qualitative Research

International Review of Qualitative Research

Qualitative Health Research Journal

Qualitative Inquiry

Qualitative Sociology Review

The Qualitative Report (online journal)