

Chapter



Introduction and Overview of the Field

FOCUS YOUR READING

- Qualitative research is a general term that describes in-depth research about human behavior.
- Role of the researcher is critical.
- There are 10 critical elements of qualitative research.

Anyone who isn't confused here doesn't really understand what's going on.

—Anonymous

The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.

—John Berger

The news media continues to send the message: student test scores are down. The United States is behind many industrialized countries in terms of student performance. Teachers are loathe to enter the profession and many drop out after only a short time in the classroom. Hispanics are the fastest growing minority in U.S. elementary and high schools. Yet schools are failing them as well as other minorities—low test scores, increased dropout rates,

and difficulties recruiting teachers. There is increased evidence of autism and hyperactivity among children. These issues are important to consider. And, gathering statistics and examining trends can answer many of them.

But statistical evidence and trend data tell just part of the story about schools, minority achievement, or increases in unusual behaviors. Let's think about other kinds of questions we might ask about these topics. What happens in certain classrooms in which test scores are at or above average? What do students say about their involvement in studying? Why do teachers leave the profession? Why do others stay? How do families with hyperactive children cope? These types of questions (questions that involve what and why) cannot easily be answered with test scores, data, and statistical analyses. Rather, it is more appropriate to study how humans interact and various social phenomena. These questions demand gathering data through observations and in-depth discussions. They involve more than just obtaining test scores. They involve careful looking and listening to people in their natural settings. The purpose of this book, then, is to provide an understanding and guideposts of what this way of gathering and analyzing information is about, how to do it, and what it means. The general term for this way of looking and making meaning is **qualitative research**.

This is a book about the systematic investigation of social phenomena and human behavior and interaction. Note the key phrase *systematic investigation*. Research of this kind is called qualitative research—qualitative in that it relies on verbal and visual communication to answer questions. It examines humans in their natural settings rather than in experimental environments. As Mayan (2009) remarked, qualitative researchers “want to know the story behind the numbers” (p. 10). You can read a recent and detailed account of the development of the field from a social history perspective, published in *History of the Human Sciences* (Jovanovic, 2011). Writing from a global perspective (the author is based at the University of Belgrade, Serbia), she began thusly: “There are plausible academic as well as social indicators that qualitative research has become an indispensable part of the methodological repertoire of the social sciences” (p. 1).

In the hard sciences such as medicine or physics, we often think of research as involving the scientific method. This type of research involves gathering numerical data and testing hypotheses. Research of this kind is often called **quantitative research**—quantitative in that it relies on experiments, numbers, and statistics to answer questions. But in the soft sciences such as education or psychology, we might look at alternative ways of conducting research. This latter type of research involves non-numerical data, particularly words or visual images.

There are many books available that describe and explain quantitative research. You probably have had some exposure to this type of research. For example, you might have read about experiments that explore different ways of learning. In his famous experiments with rats, Skinner helped us understand how positive reinforcement was a more effective way of improving behavior than negative reinforcement. These studies helped teachers see ways to improve student learning by providing positive reinforcement. Or, you may be familiar with Skinner's teaching machine. Experiments were conducted that involved rewarding correct responses. These studies were the forerunners of programmed instruction. Have you read about the experiments on monkeys that Harlow conducted? His studies revealed the effects of love on normal development. Have you encountered experiments on conservation of mass, weight, and volume based on Piaget's study of

children? Teachers learned that the teaching of math needed to move from concrete to abstract concepts based on the developmental growth of children. Thus, in early grades, teachers concentrated on concrete concepts rather than abstract ideas. Cuisenaire rods helped reinforce these concrete experiences. Experiments like these help us understand something about ways of teaching and learning. But much more was still to be learned. Researchers were asking different kinds of questions: What actually goes on in a math lesson? How do children interact with each other and with adults? What do some children feel about learning information that does not connect with their own lives? These kinds of questions led researchers to look for other ways of conducting research in schools.

In this book, I introduce you to ways to answer these and similar questions. I will talk about research that does not involve quantitative data. It does not yield tests or gather numbers. It does not involve statistics. It is not intimidating, off-putting, or far removed from your life as a professional. There are no formulae. This type of research—qualitative research—does not involve experiments at all. Its aim is to study humans in their natural settings in order to understand various aspects of their behavior. You might be familiar with research of this kind conducted by anthropologists. In the early years, anthropologists studied diverse cultures and traveled to far reaches of the earth. For U.S. anthropologists such as Benedict or Mead, traveling to Samoa or New Guinea offered opportunities to study cultures very different than their own. Many of these employed the research strategy of **ethnography**. Ethnographers emphasized observations in natural settings with the goal of describing the people and their culture. Anthropology is one discipline that fits into the category of qualitative research. But it by no means is the only one. Later in this book, I will introduce you to other types of qualitative research approaches.

While quantitative research follows fairly objective and clear guidelines, qualitative research most certainly does not. In fact, there is no one single thing that can be called qualitative research. Rather, I see qualitative research as an umbrella term that encompasses many different ways of studying humans. This puts you, the student, in somewhat of a dilemma. How can you learn what it is, how to do it, and what it means if there are so many ways? That is the challenge that I face and you face as you begin to learn about qualitative research.

It is my objective that when you complete the book, you will be able to design and conduct a qualitative research study. I do not suggest that the task is simple, for you will find ambiguities and lack of precision and even inconsistencies in what you read and encounter. I hope that the information I provide will take you far along the path.

No doubt many of you who read these pages currently work in the field of education, have done so in the past, or are contemplating doing so. Much of your professional experience targets the here and now. Your focus is usually on teaching, counseling, or administration. You might work with adults or children. Most of your time is spent getting through the day, and you have not had the inclination or time to do more than reflect on practices. You might not have actually planned or conducted any research on your own. Now that you are taking this course, you have the opportunity to engage in systematic and planned investigations about questions you may find interesting. I pose some below.

As you think about students, you might ask yourself these questions: How do I get my students to apply themselves, to pay attention, or to enjoy learning? Why is it that some students

seem to learn more quickly than others? How should I motivate students to learn? How can I account for individual differences among my students? How can I understand those students who are different from me? How is my class similar to or different from others around me? What about students who have had few home experiences that foster learning? Why can I reach some students but not others?

As you think about teachers or other adults, you might consider different questions. What is it like to be a teacher? Why do so many who are initially attracted to teaching decide to leave the profession? What could schools do to retain talented professionals? What could schools do to help teachers who are having difficulties but still want to remain in the profession?

You might find yourself interested in looking at specific groups of individuals in the educational field. What challenges do women face as they seek to move up the ladder? How do teachers of color express their views and share elements of their social group? Or, you might consider how adults navigate in online learning environments. I suspect you can add to this list by thinking about the problems and challenges you face each day while working in the educational arena.

Why do I pose these questions, and what do they have to do with qualitative research? I put forth these examples because they are important to consider but are not often addressed from a research perspective. Earlier I talked about educational experiments. But other approaches to educational research might involve conducting a survey of a large group. The focus of such a survey is often quantitative: how many graduate from high school, how many pass the state standards, or how much money is spent for books in the library. While this information can be valuable, it does not provide answers to the kinds of questions I posed earlier. These questions are more suitable for qualitative research designs.

Many of you are unfamiliar with qualitative research. You may have heard the term but do not really know what it means. In this book, I introduce you to many aspects of qualitative research. I discuss ethical issues involved in planning and conducting such research. I talk about various research approaches from which qualitative research has evolved. I ask you to reflect on how you affect and are affected by qualitative research. I provide specific ideas about how to do qualitative interviewing and observations. I consider the challenge of organizing and of making sense of the data that you collect. I talk about the effects of social media on qualitative research and ways in which researchers can use social media in their research. I introduce you to current thinking about how to evaluate a qualitative research study. Throughout this book, I provide you with many examples that will help as you embark on this very interesting journey of thinking about conducting research in a new way.

I want to convey a general understanding of what qualitative research is all about. It is multidimensional and fluid. From my previous examples, you can see that certain kinds of questions are more appropriately explored using qualitative techniques than others. It relies heavily on the voices of humans. It uses **inductive reasoning**, moving from the specific to the general. Novice researchers are sometimes frustrated because there are no clear agreed upon ways to do it. They are challenged and, at the same time, exhilarated. You can learn how to do this kind of research. You are about to embark on a challenging and exciting way of thinking about important questions. The path is no doubt different from one you have followed previously, and therein is the challenge.

Did You Know



Some journals devote themselves exclusively to qualitative research. Two publish exclusively online: the *Qualitative Report*, published by Nova Southeastern University, start date 1990; and *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, published in Berlin, start date 1999. Both are free. Two journals (published by SAGE) are issued in hard copy and can be accessed online via appropriate permission: *Qualitative Inquiry*, with U.S. editors, start date 1995; and *Qualitative Research*, with editors from Wales, start date 2001.

■ Definitions and Illustrative Examples

I find myself struggling to provide you with a definition that is meaningful, inclusive, and yet conveys the diversity within the broad term qualitative research. Among the first to write about the field extensively were Lincoln and Guba (1985). By the time the first *Handbook of Qualitative Research* was published (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), definitions included “multimethod in focus,” “interpretive,” and “naturalistic approach to subject matter.” Some take a very narrow view, while others give it a broad brush. In fact, there is no clear agreement on a definition. Some even speak of a lack of a coherent definition (Olson, 1995) or one that is difficult to get (Simmons-Mackie & Damico, 2003). Even Schwandt (2007), in *The Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, did not provide a specific definition of the term. A 2011 Google search yielded diverse ideas. A set of research techniques in which data is obtained from a relatively small group of respondents and not analyzed with statistical techniques; follows an inductive research process and involves the collection and analysis of qualitative (i.e., non-numerical) data to search for patterns, themes, and holistic features; is concerned with understanding the processes, which underlie various behavioural patterns. *Qualitative* is primarily concerned with “why.” In the social sciences, this is the analysis of phenomena, which is not based on measuring or counting. Relevant methods of data collection include participant observation, focus-group interviews, or in-depth interviewing. Each of these definitions takes you to a specific source.

For our purposes, I would like you to consider this definition:

Qualitative research is a general term. It is a way of knowing in which a researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information obtained from humans using his or her eyes and ears as filters. It often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural, online, or social settings. It can be contrasted with quantitative research, which relies heavily on hypothesis testing, cause and effect, and statistical analyses.

Perhaps some examples will help you to get a clearer picture of what qualitative research is. Mary, a student in her early 30s, was particularly interested in young children. Throughout her life, she had been a “loner” with few friends. She wondered about other children who seemed like her. Mary decided she wanted to study the informal ways young children form friendships or find themselves outside the mainstream. Because she volunteered in a preschool, she asked permission to

observe several classes. She developed a schedule to spend at least four hours per week in the school. She decided it would be wise to observe at different times of the day. Initially, she did not know quite what she was looking for. She decided to look both at students who always seemed to be part of a group and at students who stayed by themselves. She thought she knew what was meant by friendship, but she decided not to review the literature at this point. Rather, she made an explicit statement in her journal of what friendship meant to her and what she remembered about forming friendships (or not) when she was younger. During the course of her three-month study, she took extensive notes. Sometimes she took photographs or videos. She also decided that she would speak to the teacher and aides about their ideas of friendship. In a few cases, she decided to approach some of the children individually. Eventually, she recorded all her information in a database. She began her analysis by **coding** the notes she had made; that is, she sorted and organized the text to identify recurrent **themes** and concepts. For example, if one student always hung around with another student, she highlighted the entry in red. If one student offered to assist another student, she highlighted the note in blue. If one student was always alone, she chose a third color for that note. At this point, she decided to examine what others had written about friendships among young children. Eventually, she was able to organize her **codes**—the terms she used to identify chunks of the data—into categories and develop some themes from them. I have just given you a bare outline of the study, but I hope you get the idea. The study built on Mary's personal interests and her professional experience. If you wanted to give this type of study a label, you might call it **classroom ethnography**.

Steven was also interested in the topic of friendship. He was a retired military enlisted man. He had decided to return to school and to explore working with seniors. His area of expertise and interest was older adults. He gained access to a seniors' home and received permission to conduct extensive interviews with those residents who were willing to participate. He, too, began by making explicit his own view of friendship. Writing in his journal, Steven found himself thinking back over the years. Who had his friends been? How long had the friendships lasted? What kind of person did he choose as a friend? Who chose him? He was a little confused by the many questions. His general design involved extensive interviews with several residents of the home. He was concerned that the residents might not be able to maintain interest for too long, so he planned to conduct at least two shorter interviews with each of 10 residents. Since Steven had some knowledge of qualitative computer software, he began by putting his notes into the computer. He also transcribed each interview after completion. He then began to look for common elements among the interviews. He found himself working back and forth between coding and questioning. In this way, he refined his questions, picked up missing information from some residents, and got a better feel for his data. This type of study relied heavily on **in-depth interviews** and might be labeled a **case study** of friendships as seen by seniors.

A third example shows yet another way to consider the topic of friendship. Alice was especially interested in teenage girls. She volunteered at an afterschool program that served many girls. She had begun to notice certain cliques forming and decided she wanted to investigate the nature of these cliques; how the girls formed friendships within the cliques; and how others were invited into, or excluded from, the cliques. Alice had some experience conducting **focus groups** so this was her main avenue to gain information. She also decided that she wanted to use the computer chat rooms that the girls had formed. Alice added video clips of club meetings and informal gatherings to her database. This type of study, which examined the **lived experiences** of these teenagers, might be called a **phenomenology**.

In these three examples, you can see that each investigator approached the topic of friendship somewhat differently. Each made use of professional contacts to obtain access to certain groups. Each tried to narrow the scope of the investigation by looking at a particular type or class of individual (e.g., young children, seniors, teenagers). They chose data collection methods with which they were comfortable and that afforded them rich information. One relied on computers to assist in data analysis. Some performed a study that fit a particular type of qualitative research (e.g., ethnography), while others operated from a more eclectic mode. Let's return to the definition from above: *Qualitative research* is a way of knowing that assumes that the researcher gathers, organizes, and interprets information with his or her eyes and ears as a filter. It is a way of doing that often involves in-depth interviews and/or observations of humans in natural and social settings. It can be contrasted with *quantitative research*, which relies heavily on hypothesis testing, cause and effect, and statistical analyses.

Each type of study met the criteria outlined in the definition. As you read examples of other studies, you should decide to what extent they meet the criteria. It should be clear to you that there is no single way to conduct a qualitative research study. Throughout this text, I offer you many examples that will help you gain a clearer understanding of what qualitative research is.

■ Background and History

You might find it helpful to know a little history of how the field developed. The education of teachers in the United States began with teacher training offered by normal schools designed to teach young women how to work with children of elementary school age. The first state-supported normal school was opened in Massachusetts in 1839. These individuals received training in child development and pedagogy. Universities were not involved in teacher training until around the turn of the 20th century. The first schools of education were developed at New York University and Columbia University in 1887; Teachers College at Columbia granted its first PhD in 1899 and the first EdD in 1935.

When preparation for a degree in education expanded beyond the study of teaching techniques, many institutions of higher learning added a **research** component. These institutions were faced with a challenge: What were the best ways for educators to conduct research? The answer appeared straightforward. They would adopt research methods associated with the scientific world. By using such methods, they reasoned, the field of education would be elevated to a high level.

One of the first dissertations was written by Rufi in 1926. He studied the inadequacy of the small high school. Influenced by his findings, Wooden and Mort (1929) conducted a study of supervised correspondence study for high school pupils. Wooden was a superintendent of schools, and Mort was a professor of education at Columbia. Wooden and Mort took a real problem that had surfaced in other research and attempted to conduct a systematic investigation. By today's standards, one might say that their study did not constitute experimental research: It is basically a description of how a small high school can make course material available to its students. But I think this study is important for two reasons. It demonstrates that school and university people worked together in the early years on problems of common interest. Second, it shows that decisions in education can be based on systematic investigation and study.

I think it is helpful for you to remember that although the students were almost exclusively female, those who planned the programs were almost exclusively male. These male-dominated departments operated under the assumption that they knew best. And for many years, women had no power in the academy. Lagemann's (2000) excellent historical account will help you see some of the issues more clearly. She suggests that the entire field was marginalized and seen as second class. Her reason: It was women's work.

Two factors influenced the way in which educational research developed in higher education. First, teacher training moved from normal schools to colleges and universities. Second, graduate degree programs were developed. Additional courses were needed, and questions were asked about how students learned, what curricula should be offered, and how teachers should be evaluated. The colleges needed to develop a curriculum that would incorporate research methods so that students could be prepared to design and conduct their own research. The **scientific method** is a systematic way of testing hypotheses and determining cause and effect. It involves several basic steps: develop a question, identify related research, develop a **hypothesis** (a formal statement about the relationship between variables), design an experiment, analyze the data to test the hypothesis, and present results. One very important characteristic is that the data gathered and the methods of analysis are quantitative. The scientific method relies heavily on numbers and statistics. Different terms are often used to describe the scientific method. In this book, I have used them interchangeably. I might talk about the scientific method; quantitative methods; experimental research; traditional paradigms; **foundationalist** (traditional experimental research) paradigms; **positivism**, which deals only with observable entities and objective reality; or traditional research paradigms. While there are subtle differences among the terms, for your purposes, those differences are not critical because my focus here is to consider alternative approaches to conducting research.

Traditional research **paradigms**, or ways of seeing the world, make certain assumptions about the world. They assume that there is an objective reality that researchers should try to uncover as they conduct their research. Further, they assume that the role of the researcher is neutral; his or her purpose is to describe an objective reality. These paradigms are called **positivist**, a term associated with Auguste Comte, who wrote in the first half of the 19th century. In his development of the field of **sociology**, the study of social lives and behaviors, he suggested that we should look for observable facts and apply methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences. He actually called himself the Pope of Positivism. This positivist tradition dominated the way research was done in education for many years.

It became evident that capturing a reality that was "out there" was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. As a consequence, postpositivist ideas emerged around the end of World War II as the assumptions of positivism were questioned. A postpositivist point of view held that researchers should strive to capture reality by using multiple methods. In such a way, reality would be approximated (see Trochim, 2001, for greater detail about the differences between positivism and **postpositivism**).

Traditional ways of doing research (positivism and postpositivism) dominated the field of research in education until the 1980s. From the scientific movement and testing that began in the 1920s, educational research adopted a stance that was scientific, objective, and rigorous. Breuer et al. (2002) have reminded us that "the (social) sciences usually try to create the impression that the results of their research have objective character" (§ 1). There was little room for other disciplines

that seemed to be “soft” or “subjective.” Thus, anthropology, sociology (unless it was statistical), phenomenology, or other approaches to answering questions were seen as somewhat lesser. These would not be approaches that could be used to answer important questions in education or to provide us with pure factual information. At least until the 1980s, it was accepted practice to conduct educational research using the scientific method. Experimental designs and statistics were emphasized. Hypothesis testing was expected. Objectivity and rigor were considered critical.

Much of the movement into qualitative research came from the field of **anthropology**, in which ethnographic research was preferred. We began to see ethnographies about schools (for a detailed history, see Zou & Trueba, 2002). At times, some anthropologists doing ethnographies called themselves qualitative researchers—no doubt to distinguish themselves from those doing traditional quantitative research. You might find it interesting to read Eisenhart’s (2001) overview of educational ethnography. She wrote about three “muddles” that confront her as an ethnographer: the meaning of culture, the conflicting acceptance regarding ethnography, and the responsibility to those being studied. During this period, many qualitative researchers tried to meet the criteria of quantitative research and adopt methods that relied on validity, high structure, and statistical analysis to count and tabulate data. Some even said that qualitative research “attempted to do good positivist research with less rigorous methods and procedures” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9).

It became clear to some qualitative researchers that striving to be positivists or postpositivists and accepting the assumptions of these perspectives was not what they wanted to do or to be. New generations of qualitative researchers adopted a **poststructural** or **postmodern** point of view (e.g., Koro-Ljungberg, 2008; Mazzei, 2007). Some said that a positivist or postpositivist stance was no longer the only acceptable way to conduct research. Multiple realities constructed by the researcher replaced the traditional single approximation of an objective reality. This group of people also rejected the traditional criteria associated with judging quantitative research. They were concerned that a traditional view of scientific research kept the voices of many silenced. Some were interested in personal responsibility, multiple voices, and verisimilitude, instead of objectivity and validity.

In the first decade of the 2000s, it is evident to me that research has taken on a political agenda (see Howe, 2009). One camp would have us believe that we need to return to traditional research models—what Patton (2002) and others have called the “gold standard,” or randomized control trials (see also Eisenhart, 2006). For example, Conostas (2007), in his study of journal articles published in 2001 (prior to the move toward standardized tests and accountability) and again in 2005, demonstrated a decrease in nonexperimental research. Torrance (2008) spoke of the movement in the United States for randomized control trials and the (unfortunate, in my view) development of standards and guidelines to control the production of qualitative research. Further, Torrance commented that this movement, which he called **neopositivist**, has reached the United Kingdom. His suggestion was to engage with policy makers, even at the same time recognizing the possibility of co-option and collusion. Hammersley’s (2008) thoughtful collection of his previous writings also spoke to the challenge qualitative researchers face as they deal with funding agencies. He described the field as one in crisis. The August 2009 issue of the *Educational Researcher* has as its primary theme the topic of epistemology, methodology, and education sciences. Writing the lead article, Howe (2009) contended that although explicit positivism was discarded some time ago, he suggested that “a tacit form continues to thrive in education research” (p. 428). In response, Bredo (2009) suggested that Howe’s comments were

somewhat hasty while Johnson (2009) argued for the multiple method approach. Tillman (2009) posited that some problems require methods outside of the traditional positivist approach. I do not think that all is lost, however, because we see some organizations take an activist posture and see research that advocates for human rights (see, e.g., the program announcement of the Fifth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 2009, at www.icqi.org/). You can read more of my thoughts on this topic in Chapter 15.

In May 2010, more than 100 qualitative researchers from many European countries met to discuss European qualitative research. You might be surprised to learn that there are a number of qualitative research traditions unknown to the English-speaking world. For example, there are deep-rooted traditions from Poland and Spain unknown to those of us who do not speak the languages. Some of the themes of the conference included narrative and discourse data, collection and analysis of visual data, and using qualitative data in social policy (Delamont & Atkinson, 2010). The theme of the 2011 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association points the way for the second decade of the 21st century. Larson (2011), program chair, explained the meaning of the conference theme and title—*Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good*. She commented that although there is an impressive body of educational research, much of it has not made its way into everyday practices (p. 68). She continued—there is a disconnect between educational practices and educational research. One innovative idea offered at this year’s meeting was a documentary film based upon a school-based research project about youth performance poets.

■ Some Basic Comparisons Between Quantitative and Qualitative Research

I think it might help you to understand these two different philosophical and methodological ways of knowing if I make some basic comparisons. I do this to assist your understanding; however, I want you to recognize that the lines between the two are not completely fixed, and overlap is often possible. In fact, one accommodation to the overlap is what is known as the mixed methods approach. At this point in your learning, however, I draw some major distinctions by looking at the assumptions that each method makes. In Tables 1.1a and 1.1b, I compare and contrast these two ways of thinking about and doing research from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

A traditional view holds that quantitative research is better and leads to results that are more believable. Others argue that we are making too much out of the differences. One of the best sources of this latter idea can be found in Trochim (2001). The topic, according to Trochim, is so important that “there has probably been more energy expended on debating the differences between and relative advantages of qualitative and quantitative methods than almost any other methodological topic in social research.” His view is that it is much ado about nothing.

In a sense, Parker (2004) agreed with Trochim (2001), but takes a slightly different position. Most traditionalists argue that the only proper or real scientific research is quantitative research. However, I want you to think about these issues in a different way. Suppose that qualitative research is seen as science (Harré, 2004; Parker, 2004). According to Parker’s interpretation of Harré, laboratory experiments are actually prescientific, and quantitative researchers need to account for “the

reflexive capacity of human beings, the meaningful nature of the data they produce, and the way that claims are made about individuals from aggregated descriptions of behaviour from particular populations” (p. 4). Parker continued forcefully as he discusses questions about quality. Parker did not answer these questions. He posed them for you to consider.

It is crucial to the enterprise of scientific work generally, and qualitative research in particular, that the way we go about it is open to debate. Parker (2004) presented some questions for which there are no clear answers and much disagreement.

1. *What counts as good?* (a) It corresponds to the norms of established scientific study. (b) It will improve the lives of those who participated. (c) It is intrinsically interesting and will provoke and satisfy those who are curious about the questions posed.
2. *Who should it be for?* (a) It should be directly accessible to ordinary people outside psychology. (b) It should contribute to the accumulating body of knowledge for the use of other researchers. (c) Those who participated should gain something from it in exchange for their time.
3. *What counts as analysis?* (a) A careful redescription using some categories from a particular framework. (b) The discovery of something that can be empirically confirmed as true. (c) The emergence of a new meaning that was entirely unexpected.
4. *What is the role of theory?* (a) Mystification by those versed in jargon at the expense of those who participated. (b) A necessary antidote to the commonsense and often mistaken explanations for human behaviour. (c) The space for thinking afresh about something. (p. 5)

The questions Parker (2004) proposed are quite different from traditional ideas. I offer them to you so that you can begin to really think about the activities in which you are involved. I don't mean to imply that there are right or wrong answers. That would be presumptuous. Nor are there right or wrong questions. As you continue with your learning, keep in mind that things are not always as they seem or as they once were. Whatever your views are, it is important that you are aware that the comparisons and judgment about which type of research is better continues to be a controversy even as you read this chapter.

Up to this point, I have asked you to compare qualitative research with traditional quantitative research. Tables 1.1a and 1.1b suggest many of these differences. But you can also think about qualitative research in terms of worldview, traditions, or methods. Some people think of qualitative research in terms of the way they know or understand the world. While quantitative researchers think about the world as having an objective reality, many qualitative researchers speak about a worldview in which reality is constructed by the researcher. As such, there is no single reality that exists independent of the researcher. Rather, the researcher constructs multiple realities. For example, in postmodern thinking, subjectivism and constructivism are two terms that are often used to describe how people see the world. **Constructivism** is a **theory**, or proposed explanation of a phenomenon, that says that knowledge is constructed by the researcher and is affected by his or her context. Crotty (2003) suggested a subjective stance: We see the world through our own construction of it. You can understand this more clearly if you think about the idea that “the subject is the meaning maker, and whatever meaning is imposed may come from a seemingly endless source of experiences” (Faux, 2005, ¶ 5).

Table 1.1a Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Research

<i>Theoretical</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Nature of Reality (Ontology)	Multiple realities. Reality is constructed by the observer.	Single reality. In a well-designed study, a reasonable approximation of reality can be observed.	These two ideas are not as far apart as they seem. Most qualitative researchers do not take the position that any reality is a reasonable one. Many quantitative researchers acknowledge the influence of the observer, even while trying to limit it.
Objectivity/Subjectivity Dichotomy	Subjectivity based on role of researcher is expected. Objectivity is inconsistent with the idea of a constructed reality.	Objectivity is critical in a scientific approach to acquiring knowledge.	Quantitative researchers acknowledge difficulties in reaching objectivity. Many qualitative researchers still hold on to the objectivity stance.
Role of Researcher	Researcher is central to any study. Interpretations are based on researcher's experience and background.	Researcher tries to remain outside of the system, keeping biases to a minimum.	In fact, both acknowledge that researcher cannot stay outside the system. Double blind experiments are designed to do this, but other factors may compromise things.
Generalizability, Cause and Effect	Not interested in cause and effect or generalizing, but want people to apply to own situations.	Goal to apply to other situations.	Quantitative researchers are more successful in cause/effect than in generalizing, since samples are often limited.
Ways of Knowing	There are multiple ways of knowing. We can learn about something in many ways.	Best way of knowing is through the process of science.	But science is not so pristine.

Now I want you to think about some of the practical distinctions.

Lincoln and Guba (2000) used the term *constructivism* when they wrote about how the world is viewed. Similar to Crotty (2003), their writing suggested that realities are socially constructed. It should be clear to you that the researcher's role in qualitative research is critical because he or she makes sense of, or constructs, a view of the world.

Others associate qualitative research with methodologies rather than views of the world. They consider how to conduct qualitative interviews or observations. They analyze data and look for themes. Still others associate qualitative research with various research approaches or paradigms that inform their work. They look for an approach that will provide a theoretical basis for their thinking. They might decide to do a case study or a phenomenology, for example.

Table 1.1b Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods of Research

<i>Practical</i>	<i>Qualitative</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Purpose	Understand and interpret social interactions.	Test hypotheses. Look at cause and effect. Prediction.	In general, most qualitative research is not interested in hypothesis testing and most quantitative research is. However, survey research using quantitative techniques describes without testing hypotheses.
Group Studied	Tends to be smaller, nonrandom. Researchers may get involved in lives of those studied.	Tends to be larger, randomly selected. Anonymity important.	Many quantitative researchers are not able to randomly select.
Variables	Study of the whole rather than specific variables.	A few variables studied.	Quantitative researchers are limited to variables measured by a test.
Type of Data Collected	Emphasis is on words. Increasing interest in visual data.	Emphasis is on numbers.	Sometimes qualitative researchers use numbers and quantitative researchers use interviews.
Type of Data Analysis	Coding and themes. Some use computers.	Statistical analysis. Computers.	Both might use computer programs, but quantitative researchers use statistics.
Writing Style	Less formal, more personal.	Scientific and impersonal.	Informal style of qualitative may suggest less value to traditionalists.

All these ideas are important. How is a worldview determined or constructed? What methodologies are used to learn about the world? What approaches serve as a theoretical basis for the research? It is critical for you to know that there is no “right” way to think about qualitative research. It is a way of knowing and a way of doing.

■ Mixed Methods Research Approaches

Just when you think you are grasping that there are two major ways of thinking about and doing research on humans, I want to offer information about a third way of thinking that has emerged in the late 1990s, becoming more prominent as the second decade of the 21st century takes hold. This paradigm has a different view of the world than either quantitative or qualitative. It is not a positivist view, nor is it a constructivist one. It operates from a pragmatic perspective, and questions about how one knows the world are of less importance than those involved in how to combine elements from qualitative and quantitative paradigms.

As this alternative approach has taken hold, so has the need for an outlet for this type of research. So *The Journal of Mixed Methods Research* began publication in January 2007. Writing

the initial editorial, Tashakkori and Creswell stated that the journal “starts a new era in the conceptualization and utilization of integrated approaches across the social and behavioural sciences” (p. 3). Although the idea that qualitative and quantitative approaches can be combined had been discussed for several decades earlier, it was not until the 1990s that some scholars such as Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998, 2003) set the stage for the notion that mixed methods research can be seen as a new paradigm. Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) suggested that mixed methods are becoming recognized as a third major research approach. Although I have emphasized a contemporary view of differences between qualitative and quantitative methods, they argue that these differences in views of the world go back to the ancient philosophers. Using their explanations, Plato and Socrates represent a quantitative viewpoint of a singular truth while the Sophists Protagoras and Gorgias represent a qualitative viewpoint of multiple truths. How do mixed methods fit in? It is a pragmatic compromise, a middle ground. They suggest that cultural anthropologists and some sociologists, in fact, employed both qualitative and quantitative approaches. But they acknowledge that the current thinking about mixed methods is of more recent vintage, one that is a 21st-century phenomenon.

Johnson et al. (2007) have helped us understand this approach. They discussed several themes. One concern is what is “mixed,” how much is mixed, and the breadth of the mixing. Since the field is evolving, there are divergent views on these topics. For your understanding, think of studies that use both qualitative and quantitative data.

You may think that equal emphasis is given to both types of data. Although Johnson and his colleagues (2007) suggested that there may be subtypes of mixed methods (p. 124), in my experience, many of the journal articles present quantitative results before the qualitative and treat the latter as a “lesser.” Hesse-Biber (2010) agreed. She spoke of a “mixed methods praxis” that places quantitative methods first. She offered several case studies that serve to place qualitative approaches in a primary position vis-à-vis quantitative. Bryman (2007) suggested ways in which the findings can be written in a more integrated manner. Using a qualitatively driven mixed methods approach, Hall and Ryan (2011) presented their findings about a study of educational accountability that places qualitative research in the forefront. One way they do this is to focus on the “context, experience and meanings” while still including other ways of knowing (p. 107).

How are you to make sense of these disparate views? As you learn about this field, it is important to keep in mind that there are no simple, fixed answers to these questions. Different writers and researchers adopt different views—partly influenced by their own personal perspective. You will not find simple step-by-step solutions to the questions you face.

A word of caution is in order: Do not confuse mixed methods with multimethod. The latter explains studies that might make use of different ways of collecting and analyzing data in the same study. But they use a single research approach or paradigm. In a multimethod study, a researcher might gather data using interviews as well as observing or reviewing archival records. In a mixed methods study, she might gather data using surveys and in-depth interviews. Think of it this way. A multimethod study involves all qualitative data or all quantitative data. A mixed method study involves both qualitative and quantitative data.

In this chapter, I identify 10 critical elements that apply to research that is qualitative and ask that you think about each one. In subsequent chapters, I discuss in greater depth methodologies, approaches, and philosophy. I hope you will find this journey challenging, stimulating, and fun.

■ Ten Critical Elements of Qualitative Research

1. Description, Understanding, and Interpretation of Human Behavior

In general, the main purpose of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human experience. It is about humans. The purpose of qualitative research is to describe, understand, and interpret human *phenomena*, human *interaction*, or human *discourse*. When we speak about phenomena, we often think of lived experiences of humans. When we speak about human interaction, we often think of how humans interact with each other, especially in terms of their culture. When we speak about human discourse or narrative, we think of humans communicating with each other or communicating ideas. Sometimes phenomena, interaction, and discourse are intertwined.

Qualitative researchers tend to ask “why” questions and questions that lead to a particular meaning (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Because qualitative researchers are interested in meaning and interpretation, they typically do not deal with hypotheses. Quantitative research is designed to test hypotheses. Qualitative research is not designed to test hypotheses or to generalize to other groups. While early efforts at qualitative research were primarily descriptive, it is now more generally accepted that a qualitative researcher goes beyond pure description. You may know of some early work that sets forth things that happen to a particular group, group member, or subculture. Wolcott (1973) gave a detailed account of a principal after following him for a year. His emphasis is a descriptive account rather than an interpretation.

Many believe that it is the role of the researcher to bring understanding, interpretation, and meaning. An example might help you to see this more clearly. Richardson (2008) wrote a humorous ethnographic account of her dinner with Lord Esqy and other prominent figures on the occasion of her giving a lecture at the University of Melbourne. In this account, she moves beyond simple description and leads us to greater insight about the culture that is so different from hers.

Some feminist researchers and postmodernists take a political stance and have an agenda that places the researcher in an activist posture. These researchers often become quite involved with the individuals they study and try to improve their human condition.

2. Dynamic

In general, qualitative research is thought to be fluid and ever changing. As such, it doesn't follow one particular way of doing things. There are many traditions that inform qualitative research. Often, qualitative researchers pose new kinds of questions and explore new ways of answering them.

Here are some examples that will help you see how dynamic qualitative research has become. In the past, ethnographers traveled to countries and cultures different from their own. They immersed themselves in the culture for an extended period and attempted to understand the culture. You may have read of Margaret Mead's trip to Samoa or Oscar Lewis's visit with five families in Mexico. Some sociologists (the Chicago school) tended to study immigrants and their life experiences (see, e.g., Bulmer, 1984, for a detailed account of sociology in Chicago). Even today, some ethnographers take field trips with their students; Harris (2011) conducted fieldwork with his students in Coastal Ecuador. Blommaert and Jie (2010) described their experience in the field. But many have moved to the Internet to study cultures. For example, Markham (1998) studied themes of life in cyberspace.

Qualitative researchers often conduct interviews in which the participants tell their stories and do not follow a predetermined format or set of questions. Rubin and Rubin (2005) spoke about interviewees, informants, or conversational partners rather than subjects or sample. They suggest that in qualitative interviewing “you can understand experiences in which you did not participate” (p. 3). Because much of the interviewing can be unstructured, they suggest that qualitative interviewers “explore new areas and discover and unravel intriguing puzzles” (p. 4). I know that this dynamic nature of qualitative interviewing is a critical element in the development of a successful qualitative study.

Qualitative researchers do not always know whom they will study or what they will study. Qualitative researchers feel free to modify protocols as they progress through the ever-changing landscape of those they study. They sometimes rely on some of their participants to identify others who might be studied by using a snowball sampling technique (Atkinson & Flint, 2001), or they might ask key informants to nominate others who can be studied.

Qualitative researchers do not always begin with a detailed and concrete plan for how they will conduct their research. They may find that the questions they investigate evolve as they begin to gather and analyze their data. In keeping with the dynamic nature of qualitative research, you will discover that “qualitative research characteristically does not use standardized procedures—and this is a main reason for the low reputation of qualitative research in some social disciplinary ‘communities.’ Doing qualitative research makes the impact of the researcher far more obvious than in its quantitative counterpart” (Breuer, Mruck, & Roth, 2002, ¶ 3).

3. No Single Way of Doing Something

There is not just one way of doing qualitative research. When qualitative research began to take hold in education, many equated qualitative research with ethnography and saw extensive fieldwork as the way (and, for some, the only way) to conduct research. Bogdan and Biklen’s (1992) work makes this quite clear. Although its title is *Qualitative Research for Education*, its content is limited to a discussion of ethnography and related methods. I am not sure whether the 2007 edition takes a more comprehensive approach. Some identify **symbolic interactionism** with qualitative research (Blumer, 1969). Others equate qualitative research with **grounded theory** (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Still others see qualitative research as being case studies (e.g., Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2002). You will read more about some of these approaches in Chapter 5.

I think the fact that there is no specific or best way to conduct qualitative research is one of the reasons students sometimes have difficulty understanding what qualitative research is. They want it to be a single thing. “Tell me how to do it,” they say. After all, if I do scientific research and conduct an experiment, I know what makes a true experiment (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). I know what difficulties there are in conducting an experiment in a real-world setting and how to approximate a true experiment (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Trochim, 2001). I know how to conduct a survey (Dillman, 1978). Why can’t I have the “right” or “best” way to conduct qualitative research? As consumers and conductors of research, we are so often wedded to our old positivist or postpositivist paradigms, and we know that old ways are hard to discard.

Of course, we are all aware that there is no one way to do something; there is no right way to do something; there is no best way to do something. You might come to appreciate this idea if you move out of the discipline of research and into the field of art. What is “the way art should be”? The

Church used to set the standard for good art. There was only one way. But then some artists tried new ideas. People laughed at Impressionists like Monet, but now many appreciate their work. People jeered the Cubists (Picasso and Braque), and yet they are seen as opening the doors to so many other ways of making art. People said modern art was not art, and now much of it commands millions of dollars. So I urge you to keep your minds open as you explore alternative ways of doing research.

Multiple realities is an expression I touched on earlier. Can you accept that there is no single reality that exists independent of your interpretation? I am not talking about the philosophical question of whether a branch dropping from a tree in the forest makes a sound. I am talking about social interactions among humans, or thoughts individuals have about a topic, or the inner workings of a unit in a small company. There are potentially several ways to interpret what you see or hear. As the researcher, you do the interpretation. Of course, your interpretation will carry more weight if the data you gather, the manner in which you organize the data, and the vehicle you use to present your interpretation support it. For more information on credibility and legitimacy of your research, see Chapter 14.

4. Inductive Thinking

A traditional approach to research follows a **deductive approach**. Deductive reasoning works from the general to the specific. In contrast, qualitative research deals with specifics and moves to the general. You can think of this as going from the bottom up, by using observations to generate hypotheses, if indeed there are any hypotheses. Qualitative research moves from the concrete to the abstract. Researchers begin with data and use the data to gain an understanding of phenomena and interactions. They do not test hypotheses, as is typical in experimental research. Because qualitative research employs inductive thinking, I have used an inductive way of writing and presenting the material in this book. I suggest that you begin by collecting data for some kind of research project. This inductive approach is the opposite of a deductive approach to doing research. In the latter type, you would do a considerable amount of planning and write a proposal for research, rather than actually conduct research. You have heard the term *inductive approach* often throughout your school experience. But what does it really mean?

When using an inductive approach, one thing leads to another, like scaffolding. You begin by gathering a considerable amount of data. You then go through your data to see whether you can find many examples of a particular thing, in order to identify a central issue or idea (a concept or theme). Of course, you might find some statements that do not support the theme. As you collect and simultaneously look at your data, you begin to move to more general statements or ideas based on the specifics found in your data.

5. Holistic

Qualitative research involves the study of a situation or thing in its entirety, rather than identification of specific variables. Gunzenhauser (personal communication, 2005) speaks about the particular, contextual, and holistic characteristics of qualitative research. You can think of it this way: Qualitative researchers want to study how something is and understand it. They are not interested in breaking down components into separate variables. Many of you who have studied the scientific

method of research are used to looking at how one variable is caused by another, or how several variables are related to each other. This approach is used in order to test hypotheses. But in qualitative research, we are not interested in testing hypotheses. In fact, most qualitative research traditions aim for description, understanding, and interpretation and not examinations of cause and effect. Let's look at an example. Sharon has been working with young females who have returned to complete a high school education after having a baby. She meets with them once a week in the evening at a local high school. Although Sharon feels that she knows something about their basic skills in reading and math, she does not understand other aspects of these students' lives. She decides to try to determine what life is like for these students. She is not interested in looking at various factors that might predict their poor performance; she feels that she knows some of this already. Rather, she wants to know what they are like as individuals. How is their life now, and how do they think it will be when they complete high school? I think this is an ideal situation to do a qualitative study from a feminist perspective. The students are available, she has access to them, and she hopes to empower them to take charge of their lives in a more meaningful manner.

6. Variety of Data in Natural Settings

Qualitative research typically involves studying things as they exist, rather than contriving artificial situations or experiments. So a qualitative researcher might be interested in looking at a particular classroom, rather than having a teacher change her classroom to see how something she does might affect how the students learn. I recall a student of mine who was interested in studying how kindergarten students develop formal and informal rules of conduct. She observed a class each day for several months. She also joined the class occasionally and participated in some of their activities. In these ways, she was able to learn how children established rules. She did not ask the teacher to change the way she was doing anything.

Natural settings are preferred when talking to people or observing them. Interviews can be conducted in the home or office of the participant, or by phone or in cyberspace. **Observation** of the interaction of individuals in natural settings can be conducted in classrooms, in homes, in the school yard, or at a parent-teacher meeting. I had a student who observed an online chat room of middle school girls (Robbins, 2001). I have interviewed people in school libraries, at fast-food restaurants, online, and even in a custodian's closet.

Natural settings also are desirable when collecting other types of data, such as photographs, videos, or pictures created by the participants or of the environment in which the participants live or work. I have seen family portraits used as data. I have seen drawings made by children used as data. Notes taken by the researcher, either at the time of an observation or as soon thereafter as possible, are also data.

Here is an example of the use of a variety of data in a natural setting. Don was interested in studying teenagers away from their school setting. He decided that an excellent place to do this was at a local mall. He gathered his notebook and digital camera and set out for the mall. Of course, he had been there many times before and knew that teens often congregated at the food court. He bought a soda and settled down at a table near some teenagers. Because these teenagers were in a public place, he did not need to ask their permission. But he needed to be cautious about being observed himself, and he decided that he would be direct if anyone asked him what he was doing. He sat for about an hour and watched and listened. He took notes and used his camera. These data obtained in natural settings formed the basis for Don's study.

7. Role of the Researcher

The researcher plays a pivotal role in the qualitative research process. Data are collected, information is gathered, settings are viewed, and realities are constructed through his or her eyes and ears. Further, the qualitative researcher is responsible for analyzing the data through an iterative process that moves back and forth between data collected and data analyzed. And finally, the qualitative researcher interprets and makes sense of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Quantitative researchers are more likely to select a statistic that is appropriate to the hypothesis being tested. Their role in the actual analysis is, therefore, limited. Of course, how they interpret the statistical data and how they organize and report it are critical.

I know I have said this before, but it is important to remember that the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Unlike doing an experimental study, in which scientific scales or measuring instruments are often used, when doing qualitative research the researcher decides what information to gather. All information is filtered through the researcher's eyes and ears and is influenced by his or her experience, knowledge, skill, and background. Most qualitative researchers acknowledge the dilemma of trying to be unbiased and objective. In fact, postmodernists, interpretivists, constructivists, and feminists acknowledge that the elusive objectivity often sought in traditional or scientific research is inappropriate in the qualitative research arena. They have come to believe that what exists out in the world can be understood as it is mediated through the one doing the observing. I want to be very clear about this idea. There is no "getting it right" because there could be many "rights." Descriptions, understandings, and interpretations are based on the data you collect and your ability to organize and integrate them to make a meaningful whole.

A **bias** is a preference that inhibits impartial judgment. Bias and qualitative research is a topic that challenges both students and their professors. One view is that bias can be eliminated, or at least controlled, by careful work, triangulation, and multiple sources. I do not believe this is true. Bias is a concept that is related to foundationalist, traditional, or postpositivist thinking. The position I take here is that striving for objectivity by reducing bias is not important for much of qualitative research. I think that some are reluctant to adopt a qualitative research approach because they think the researcher is biased. Well, of course, the researcher has views on the topic. After all, she probably would not be investigating a particular topic if she had not thought about the topic. There is no single or simple answer to this dilemma. I think the following viewpoint is instructive.

The (social) sciences usually try to create the impression that the results of their research have *objective* character. In this view, scientific results are—or at least should be—*independent* from the person who produced the knowledge, e.g., from the single researcher. According to this perspective objectivity is what makes the difference between valid scientific knowledge and other outcomes of human endeavors and mind. On the one hand, there are many efforts to justify this perspective on epistemological and philosophical grounds. On the other hand, various practices are used to support and produce this idea of objectivity (a rather well-known and mundane example is the rhetorical strategy of avoiding the use of the first-person pronouns in scientific texts). In their everyday scientific life almost all (experienced) researchers nevertheless "know" about the impact of personal and situational influences on their research work and its results. "Officially" and in publications these influences are usually covered up—they are treated as defaults that are to be avoided. (Breuer et al., 2002, ¶ 1)

Researchers know that they influence the research and results. But some researchers, those who still hold on to a positivist or postpositivist position about objectivity, maintaining distance, and the need to reduce bias that Breuer and his colleagues (2002) cite, try to identify ways to reduce the “subjectivity” of the qualitative researcher. There are several stances taken. Some qualitative researchers, who see themselves as phenomenologists, use a technique they call **bracketing**. I will talk more about this later, but for now, think of bracketing as trying to identify your views on the topic and then putting them aside. Other qualitative researchers take the view that they can verify their interpretations by having others look at the data and go through the same process. They refer to this process as **member checks** or **inter-rater reliability**. Other qualitative researchers take the view that if they collect data from multiple sources, they will have a more accurate picture and thus remain less biased. They refer to this as **triangulation**. At this point, you are probably beginning to question some of your basic assumptions about doing research. Can we really take an objective stance? Should we want to? Why should we want to?

8. In-Depth Study

Another critical element of qualitative research involves looking deeply at a few things rather than looking at the surface of many things. An important aspect of the investigation is to look at the whole rather than isolate variables in a reductionistic manner. If we want to understand something fully, we need to look at it much more completely. Some have said it is like opening up an artichoke and looking at the layers upon layers until you reach the core. There are often gems hidden deep inside, but there is a struggle along the way to get there.

So much of qualitative research involves studying and looking at a few individuals, sometimes just one person. The study of Jermaine (Hébert, 2001) illustrated this principle well. Hébert and his colleague spent a considerable amount of time in Jermaine’s environment and collected documents, talked to others, and learned about him. Richardson (2008) studied Lord Esqy, and Wolcott (1973) studied a single principal. More often, however, qualitative researchers study individuals or groups who have similar characteristics. Glass (2001) studied families of autistic children. Repass (2002) studied professional women preparing to retire.

Others tend to study small groups as they interact with each other in a particular setting. Some of these groups may be highly structured and others loosely structured. Kidder (1989) studied a fifth-grade class. The number of individuals you study is not critical; rather, it is the nature of the study and the degree to which you explore complex in-depth phenomena that distinguishes qualitative research.

9. Words, Themes, and Writing

Words, rather than numbers, characterize qualitative research. Quite often, direct quotes from the participants are included to illustrate a certain point. Details are often included about those studied or the setting in which a study is conducted. Those who studied cultures, the ethnographers, took the position that **thick description**, a detailed description of a culture (Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 1949), is desirable in order to see underlying meanings and understandings. The idea of thick description has been adopted by many different kinds of qualitative researchers. You will often read details about the setting in which a study was conducted, how the participants looked, or even the respondents’ nonverbal gestures.

I suspect that almost any qualitative research study that you read will have used either interviews, observations, or both as a major source of data. But most of you think of data as numbers, not words. As you begin to think about any kind of qualitative research, try to remember that data do not have to be numbers; data can be words and visual representations as well. For example, Diane was studying women principals and how they dealt with issues of power. She interviewed 10 principals. She also observed them in their offices, at faculty meetings, and at school board meetings. In addition, she reviewed their written memos to faculty. It should be clear that she obtained her data from interviews, from observation, and by reviewing written material. The kind of data she collected were the principals' thoughts about interacting with superiors and subordinates, the observations she made of how the principals interacted with these two groups at meetings, general observations of the physical surroundings in which they worked, and written material provided by the principals. As you read the information in later chapters, you will find some differences in the kind of data that are collected by the various traditions. For example, ethnographers tend to spend more time immersed in the cultural environment, while phenomenologists are more likely to talk at length to participants. Contemporary ethnographers often study online culture, so the data they collect may come from e-mails or chat rooms.

Themes are developed from the data. All of the traditions and approaches eventually lead to your taking the large amount of data you collect and making sense of it. Grounded theory uses a structured approach to data analysis and offers specific steps to follow in order to organize and synthesize data. Most of the other approaches are very general in terms of how to make meaning from data. Computer software programs facilitate organizing, searching, combining, processing, and locating data. Unlike a statistical package, however, qualitative software requires your input and decision making.

Qualitative research is also characterized by a style of writing that is less technical and formal than is used in more traditional research. Additionally, qualitative researchers often write in the first person (Hamill, 1999; Intrator, 2000) or active voice. Such active voice often leads to greater trust and accountability and is more forceful. Intrator (2000) suggested several text devices writers can use to get the audience to trust the author and to show how description and interpretation are intertwined. Colyar (2009) contended that writing should be taught in qualitative research courses.

Rather than writing a report or an account as a vehicle for disseminating information, some avant-garde researchers take the output of qualitative research to a different level. They publish poetry (Weems, 2003), look at contemporary photographs or videos of significant events (Ratcliff, 2003; Robertson, 2003), or perform a dance (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). Moreira (2008) presented a performance ethnography. Caulley (2008) urged us to write creative nonfiction using fiction techniques.

10. Nonlinear

We often think of traditional research as following a certain order. You might begin with a research question, conduct a review of the literature, gather data, do an analysis, and write your conclusions. The order is relatively fixed. In contrast, qualitative research can be viewed as iterative and nonlinear, with multiple beginning points. You could start with an interest in a particular type of individual. You could begin with an observation about how an event affects certain individuals. You could begin with an interest in something you read. In addition, while quantitative research follows the sequence of data collection followed by data analysis, qualitative

research takes a somewhat different approach. In qualitative research, the researcher moves back and forth between data gathering/collection and data analysis, rather than in a linear fashion from data collection to data analysis. Imagine that you are weaving back and forth between gathering data and analyzing data. This is in contrast to what you would do if you were conducting an experimental study.

Here is an illustration of how Glass (2001) may have progressed through his study of families of autistic children. He identified a number of families who fit the criterion of having an autistic child. He scheduled his first appointment and visited the family in their home for one afternoon. Following his visit, he transcribed the interview he conducted with the mother, recorded his observations of the family, and began his journal. All data were entered into a database or a word processing program. He subsequently imported these files into **NVivo** (a computer software program for storing, organizing, and managing complex qualitative data) and began initial coding. He knew the codes were tentative and served as guidelines. Next, he scheduled a visit with a second family. He refined his questions to these new family members based on his initial coding and his thinking about what he had learned so far. He went back to his journal and his observational record. He also returned to importing his data into the software program, processed the second set of materials, and reviewed everything. This back and forth nature of the process is what I mean by iterative and nonlinear.

■ Additional Issues

In addition to the preceding 10 critical elements, I want to expose you to some other important and basic considerations. I don't want to confuse you with too much technical language, but you need to be aware of important current issues. I want you to understand that what you read here may have changed between the time I write and the time you read.

I have drawn much of my material from Lincoln and Guba (2000), who have addressed a variety of issues. I have included those I find to be critical, but you can read details of their thinking in their chapter in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. The 3rd edition appeared in 2005 and the 4th edition in 2011. This last edition addresses issues about social justice, social policy, and inequality.

Objectivity as Fiction

If you have received any training in research methods, you will have been exposed to the idea that research should be designed to yield objective and scientific evidence. This is a tenet of positivist research. In order to accomplish this, the positivists suggest that the researcher needs to remain outside the system and strive to be objective. However, the postpositivist movement acknowledged that it is not possible for the researcher to be separate from the system or society he is studying. Instead, objective reality is approximated rather than achieved. The underlying assumption, however, is that if we had the correct tools, we could characterize our reality objectively.

Some of the subsets of qualitative research, such as **interpretivism** (a doctrine that emphasizes analyzing meanings people confer on their own actions), constructivism, and critical theory, accept that reality is virtual and is shaped by various forces. Further, findings are value-laden rather than value-free. In postmodernism and poststructuralism, inquiry is value-determined.

Given these changes, I want you to begin to think about research in a new way, one that acknowledges the role of the researcher and his or her belief system. Objectivity should not be considered bad; rather, it is just another way of thinking about how we gain knowledge and what knowledge is. So, for now, try to open your mind to the idea that designing a study to provide data that is objective and factual is not part of your goal. And you are to disabuse yourself of the need to be sorry that you are not quite sufficiently objective.

Critical Role of the Researcher

Given what I have said in the previous section, you must know by now that the researcher's role is critical to qualitative research. She is the one who asks the questions. She is the one who conducts the analyses. She is the one who decides who to study and what to study. The researcher is the conduit through which information is gathered and filtered. It is imperative, then, that the researcher has experience and understanding about the problem, the issues, and the procedures.

Role of Those Studied

Traditional research often refers to those studied as **subjects**. More recently, the term **participants** has been used. But whatever term is used, quantitative researchers tend to treat those they study as anonymous objects to be measured and observed. In qualitative research, we refer to individuals who provide information for the research as participants, **informants**, or **co-researchers**. As such, those studied become the experts on the topic. Some qualitative researchers think of them as co-investigators.

The Nature of Reality (Ontology)

Although Lincoln and Guba (2000) no longer included the term **ontology** as one of the key issues, I think you will encounter it quite often. Ontology is concerned with what is real or the nature of reality. Alternative paradigms take different views of what is real. A traditional scientific paradigm (positivist) would accept an objective reality. A postpositivist view would accept that reality can only be reached in an imperfect manner but nevertheless would anticipate a researcher striving to reach it. Those espousing a critical theory paradigm consider historical realism, while those who see themselves as constructivists speak of relativism and constructed realities. Paradigms that are participatory speak of realities that are created by both the participants and the researcher. So the nature of reality means different things to qualitative researchers.

Values and Ethics (Axiology)

I would suggest that it is neither possible nor desirable for researchers to keep their values from influencing aspects of the research study. I find some qualitative researchers apologizing for their beliefs and talking about how they try to keep their beliefs out of a study. Both qualitative researchers and quantitative researchers operate within a certain belief system; however, quantitative researchers strive for a position that is value-free rather than value-laden. A second issue regarding values relates to the role of the research participants. As participants, what level of involvement can and should they have in the research and how do you protect them?

I want you to think about these ideas. For the moment, suspend your judgment about the issue. However, be aware that it influences much that is new in qualitative research.

Understanding How Various Paradigms Can Accommodate Each Other

Lincoln and Guba (2000) suggested that certain paradigms can accommodate each other, but that there are fundamental differences between positivist and other models and that “the axioms are contradictory and mutually exclusive” (p. 174). I think some examples might help you to understand this idea. If you accept a traditional scientific approach to research, you are looking for a single correct answer. It might be a statistical test that helps you decide whether or not to reject a null hypothesis. In traditional thinking, you either reject or fail to reject a hypothesis. While you might have a choice of which statistical test to use, you would accept the finding of the analysis.

In contrast, in a number of qualitative paradigms, you are looking for a way to understand and interpret the meaning of human interaction or human views. The information you receive, filtered through your own lens, is subject to a multitude of interpretations. There is no single interpretation that is better than another. You are not necessarily better at interpretation than someone else. Your faculty mentor is no better than you. Using a computer program does not make your interpretation more correct. So, because some paradigms look for a single right answer while others do not, some paradigms cannot accommodate the assumptions taken by others. But others see a way to handle quantitative and qualitative paradigms in the same study. R. B. Johnson and Christensen (2008) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) spoke about a mixed methods approach, which uses elements from both qualitative and quantitative research.

The Role Action Plays in Research

Trained as a traditional researcher, you would take the position that action is not part of your responsibility. You do the work; someone else uses it.

Action has become a major controversy that limns the ongoing debates among practitioners of the various paradigms. . . . The mandate for social action, especially action designed and created by and for research participants with the aid and cooperation of researchers, can be most sharply delineated between positivist/postpositivist and new-paradigm inquirers. (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 175)

I suspect these are ideas new to many of you. I do not believe that you are required to do something with each piece of research you do, but perhaps you can at least think about why you are doing what you are doing and what you hope to do with the information.

Issues About Who Is in Control

Suffice it to say that traditional inquiry places control in the hands of the researcher. However, in some new paradigms, control issues are intertwined with **voice** (privileged position and self-disclosure), **reflexivity** (a researcher’s capacity to reflect on his or her values), and textual

representation. I agree with Lincoln and Guba (2000), saying that “nowhere can the conversation about paradigm differences be more fertile than in the extended controversy about validity” (p. 178). You will read about this topic in greater detail in Chapter 14. At this point, I want you to be aware of the issues. What are the criteria for judging the worth of something? Who should set the criteria? Should there be any? How do the criteria differ or compare to those for traditional research? Is one way better than another? These are all issues being debated even as I write this book. There are three additional issues: voice, reflexivity, and postmodern textual representation. Researchers who adopted new paradigms became aware of how critical it was to have informants speak in their own voice. Most of you are familiar with reading quotes from participants. Some of the newer avenues for voice are in the form of plays or town meetings. Reflexivity can be many things about the self. You are the researcher as well as the learner. You might change the experience or be changed by it. Ultimately, you come to know yourself. How we represent what we learn and know is also at issue.

Self-Reflection

Qualitative researchers often include a section on **self-reflection** to indicate their awareness of self and their influence on the research process: How have my background, concerns, and interests affected the project at its various stages? How might somebody else have gone about it? For example, what questions might he or she have asked? How might he or she have interpreted these passages differently? How have I changed as a consequence of learning about others? This self-reflection can be carried out to varying degrees. You may use it to assure yourself as a quality control indicator for a particular interview, or you may wish to modify parts of your write-up in light of it. You may even wish to document this self-reflection as a section in the written report, that is, as an account of your own part in the construction of the project and its results.

Breuer et al. (2002) devoted two issues of an online journal to the topic of subjectivity and reflexivity. Such issues as the construction of a narratory self (Day, 2002), or the way in which a hermeneutic procedure for interpreting narratives helps us understand real psychological meanings (Ratner, 2002), or the postmodern view that subjectivity is assumed and appreciated (Russell & Kelly, 2002) point to the view that not only do subjectivity and reflexivity exist in qualitative research, but they also should be there.

Challenge of Doing Qualitative Research

I have heard some people say that doing qualitative research is appealing because you don't have to deal with numbers, statistics, and tables. But often, I believe, the lack of rules, the vast amounts of data to process, and the tasks of writing are baffling to some. If you are uncomfortable with ambiguity, have difficulty putting words on paper, and need high structure, you might find qualitative research frustrating.

You no doubt might also find yourself keeping a journal, engaging in self-reflection, writing extensive notes, taking videos or photographs, filling your kitchen table with note cards and colored pencils, learning how to store and retrieve information on your personal computer, learning how to access chat rooms and download conversations, writing drafts of your project, meeting with your faculty advisers, commiserating with fellow students, ignoring your family and social life, feeling the joys and hardships of your participants, and traveling on a journey of growth, frustration, and accomplishment.

■ Summary

Although there is not a consensus on the definition of qualitative research, in this chapter, I provided a working definition. Examples revealed that qualitative research deals with questions about how and why; involves extended data collection (usually including observation or interviews); requires the researcher to organize data using coding, themes, or other tools; and engages the researcher in interpreting the meaning of the data.

Ten critical elements of qualitative research were introduced: it involves description, understanding, and interpretation; it is dynamic; different methods may be employed in conducting qualitative research; it involves an inductive approach; it is holistic, viewing the situation in its entirety; data is typically gathered in natural settings; the researcher is instrumental in constructing an interpretation of reality; limited phenomena are studied in depth; reporting is characterized by thick description, often using the words of participants; and qualitative research frequently proceeds in a nonlinear fashion.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Purpose: Become familiar with critical elements of qualitative research.

Activity: During the first or second week of class, select a partner and choose one idea from the “Ten Critical Elements” listed in this chapter. Discuss how this element might be contrasted with an element from traditional research. Write a one-paragraph summary of your ideas and present it to the class.

Evaluation: Determine to what extent students are able to compare ideas about qualitative research with those of traditional quantitative research.

INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITY

Purpose: Involve students in thinking about qualitative research and recording their thoughts and ideas.

Activity: Begin your journal, either in a notebook or on the computer. The advantage of a notebook is that you can write anytime. The advantage of the computer is that your ideas are already in the computer and you will be able to share with others. Throughout the semester, continue making journal entries.

Evaluation: This activity models the dynamic and iterative nature of qualitative research. Students can review it to determine how their ideas progress over time.

Instructor’s Note: One activity I have used in a semester class is to import journal entries from each student into a computer software program, and then use those data to practice coding, forming nodes, and identifying themes.

STUDENT STUDY SITE

Log on to the Web-based student study site at www.sagepub.com/lichtman3e for additional study tools including:

- eFlashcards
- Web Resources
- Links to SAGE Journal Articles

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