

Third Edition

The Practice of
**Qualitative
Research**

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1 An Invitation to Qualitative Research



Photo 1.1 Can qualitative research shed new light on eating disorders like bulimia in a way that statistical surveys cannot?

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What's Wrong With This Picture?

Pretty, vivacious, and petite, Delia was a picture of fashionable perfection when she first walked into my office. Her tight jeans and fringed western shirt showed off her thin, 5-foot frame; her black cowboy boots and silver earrings completed a presentation that said, *Look at me!*

The perfect picture had a serious price. Delia had come to me to talk about her problem. She is bulimic. In secret, she regularly binges on large amounts of food and then forces herself to vomit. It has become a powerful habit, one that she is afraid to break because it so efficiently maintains her thin body. For Delia, as for so many others, being thin is everything. Delia shared with me:

I mean, how many bumper stickers have you seen that say “No Fat Chicks”? Guys don’t like fat girls. Guys like little girls. I guess because it makes them feel bigger and, you know, they want somebody who looks pretty. Pretty to me is you have to be thin and you have to have, like, good facial features. My final affirmation of myself is how many guys look at me when I go into a bar.

In recent years binge eating, a type of eating disorder, has garnered considerable concern from administrators at colleges and universities across the country. Statistics gathered through surveys show marked increases in such behavior among college students and their pressure and concern about the extent and severity of eating disorders on college campuses. The surveys also introduce how college administrators can more adequately address this issue to stem the tide of this growing social problem (Eisenberg, Nicklett, Roeder, & Kirz, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Many colleges often fall short of providing their students with nutritional education and outreach programs to combat eating disorders. What makes things more complicated is that those with an eating disorder like binge eating often fly under the radar of potential college outreach services that might be helpful to them. Many college-age women are also reluctant to seek help for their eating problem because they feel they will be stigmatized by being labeled with an eating disorder. Many also worry about what their peers think of them and, more importantly, what might happen if their parents find out (Geerling & Saunders, 2015; Puhl, Neumark-Sztainer, Austin, Luedicke, & King, 2014).

What do you think you might do to tackle this issue on your campus? At this point I invite you to spend 5–10 minutes jotting down a list of questions you think are important to investigate in order to better understand the phenomenon of binge eating on your college campus.

What Is Qualitative Research?

The qualitative approach to research provides a unique grounding position from which to conduct research that fosters particular ways of asking questions and provides a point of view onto the social world whose goal is to obtain understanding of a social issue or problem that privileges subjective and multiple understandings. As noted in the opening discussion of binge eating 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 I asked you to think about understanding this topic, you likely framed your questions from a qualitative perspective. Qualitative researchers are after *meaning*. The social meanings people attribute to their experiences, circumstances, and situations, as well as the meanings people embed into texts, images, and other objects are the focus of qualitative research. Therefore, at the heart of it, qualitative researchers extract the co-created meanings they gather from their participants' data in order to get at multiple subjective accounts. The focus of research is generally words, texts, and images as opposed to the gathering of statistical data (numbers) whose goal is the testing out of hypotheses using a variable language, with the goal of generalizing and confirming their research hypotheses. However, this does *not* mean that qualitative researchers do not use numbers or that quantitative researchers do not use words.

Numbers can be used by a qualitative researcher as a way to summarize some of the major qualitative themes generated from participants' in-depth interviews. So, for example, when Delia talks about her eating disorder she often uses words that focus on weight and appearance. If we look at the excerpt from her interview at the beginning of this chapter, we notice she uses the word *thin* and the word *fat* several times. She also mentions appearance-related words such as *pretty* and *good facial features*. We might want to obtain a frequency count of the number of times Delia mentions words related to weight and appearance in order to get a quantitative measure of just how focused her narrative is on weight and appearance issues across her entire interview. Doing this type of frequency count might serve as an important quantitative indicator of just how focused Delia is on these two issues in her entire interview. We might then want to compare Delia's word counts on these two issues with others in the study, in order to get a sense of how often these weight- and appearance-related words appear across the interviews collected for the entire study. We then might want to compare and contrast participants whose frequency count is high or low with regard to weight, appearance issues, and so on.

A quantitatively driven researcher, on the other hand, would usually begin with a *why* question but quickly reframe this into a testable hypothesis that posits a cause-effect relationship using a variable language, as in the following hypothesis: "The higher the self-esteem among college women the lower the rates of binge-eating disorders." Self-esteem and rates of binge-eating disorders would be treated as variables

that take on a set of numerical values. The researcher would most likely test out this hypothesis on a large-scale data set selecting among a wide spectrum of college-age women and seeking to find whether the relationship between self-esteem and binge eating, both treated as variables and expressed in numerical terms, is statistically significant even after controlling for other likely causal factors in the literature that are also said to be related to college-age women's binge-eating behaviors. This type of study aims *to confirm* a given hypothesis, unlike a qualitative approach, whose goal is to explore and discover subjective meaning. This does not mean, however, that qualitative researchers do not also develop some ideas they also test out on their qualitative data. We might, for example, find that in our study of college students with eating disorders, we have a group of women, whom we label Group A, who appear more obsessed with issues of weight and appearance than a second group, Group B. Group B students do not talk about these issues very much. We might then begin to speculate about what makes these two groups so different by looking at what other factors we think might contribute to weight and appearance obsession, which we garnered from studying the research literature on this topic, that might also serve to differentiate these two groups we found in our data. So, for example, some of the literature on eating disorders looks at the impact of peer group pressure on weight and appearance (Hesse-Biber, 2007), so we might see if there are any differences we can discern in the way in which Group A women and Group B women talk about their peers. You can see we are beginning to test out in a very informal way some of our hunches about what might be going on in our qualitative data.

It's important to keep in mind that these two approaches also *share common elements*. We might think of these qualitative and quantitative approaches as lying along a continuum rather than two distinct approaches. Also keep in mind that each of these approaches is valuable to research inquiry. Which approach you select will depend on your overall research goals and the specific questions derived from your overall methodology. And, as shown in the mixed methods chapter to come, sometimes both of these approaches are used in the same study, especially when dealing with complex multilayered problems with the goal of getting a more complex understanding of a given issue.

Qualitative research is an exciting interdisciplinary landscape composed of diverse perspectives and practices for generating knowledge. Researchers across departments in the social and behavioral sciences use qualitative methods.

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." A major dimension of research that is often subjugated is the set of assumptions researchers bring with them that guides the research process. Researchers'

views stem from the philosophical assumptions they hold about the social world in general. We can think of a **paradigm** as comprising a researcher's view of social reality in general, consisting of a range of critical philosophical components we term *ontology* and *epistemology*. A researcher's *methodology* is derived from his or her specific *paradigmatic stance* toward the social reality in terms of what a researcher assumes we know about the social world, the types of questions that can be asked, and how the research process itself should proceed. You can think of this philosophical layer as providing a point of view onto the social world that in turn serves to frame how the research process should proceed, from the type of research questions addressed to the methods and types of analysis and interpretation of one's data. Multiple philosophical points of view are explored in this chapter to give you an idea of just how powerful and important it is to be cognizant as a researcher regarding the assumptions contained in any given research endeavor and how different philosophical assumptions can result in different ways of understanding and constructing knowledge about the social world.

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.

There are three major ontological positions in qualitative research: positivism, interpretive, and critical. *Positivism* posits that the social world is patterned and 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 ontological approaches are reviewed in-depth in Chapter 2.

Epistemology

An **epistemology** is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knowledge builder (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). An epistemology includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participants is understood. Although qualitative research is characterized in part by numerous epistemological stances we can again turn to the same three major umbrella categories: positivist, interpretive, and critical. A positivist perspective privileges the researcher as the authority in the research process due to his or her objective, value-neutral stance and his or her use of standardized measurement instruments. This

creates a clear delineation between the roles of the researcher and research participants. An interpretive perspective views the researcher and research participants as co-creators in the knowledge-building process and emphasizes the perspective of the participants. A **critical approach** pays particular attention to how power is infused in the knowledge-building process. I discuss these umbrella categories in more detail in Chapter 2.

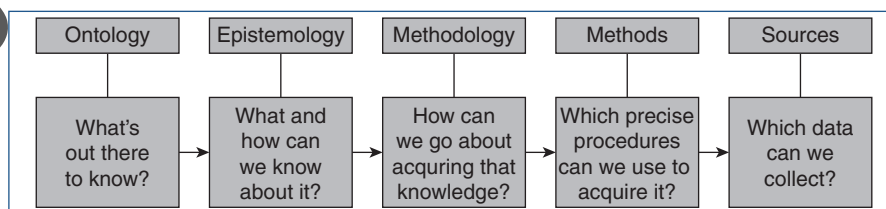
The researcher's ontological and epistemological positions (see Figure 1.1) form the *philosophical basis of a research project* (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This philosophical foundation impacts every aspect of the research process, including topic selection, question formulation, method selection, sampling, and research design.

Methodology

A **methodology** is, most simply, a strategy or plan for how a study will be executed. Methodology describes the rationale for choosing a specific method in your study. Methodology is more than methods. Methodology guides your choice of methods and how you will use them. Methodologies are also linked to specific paradigms. What methodology you select is determined by the given paradigm you are working in. Methodology links the paradigms, theoretical perspectives, and research questions that serve to determine your strategy or plan of how you will answer your question, from the set of methods you select to gather the information pertaining to your problem to the analysis and interpretative steps you take to answer the question.

So, for example, although a quantitative and qualitative researcher may decide on using an interview method, the specific type of interviewing method will depend on a researcher's paradigmatic point of view onto the social world. So, if I am a positivist researcher, I will most likely select a survey, given that I hold certain assumptions regarding the social world that assume that the social reality is knowable—meaning that I assume there is a “truth” out there for me to ascertain. I want to be objective in how I go about obtaining knowledge, so I do not allow my own values and attitudes to enter into my research study. If I were a qualitatively driven researcher whose goal is to understand the lived experience, my goal would be to privilege subjective experiences

FIGURE 1.1 The Philosophical Framework of Research Inquiry



of those I study. I do not assume there is a truth out there waiting to be found. Instead, a core assumption I hold about the social world is that reality is multiple and fluid, and there are in turn, multiple truths out there waiting to be found. My stance toward my research participants is one of listening deeply and knowing and being aware of the attitudes and values that I bring into the research project.

For example, if I am a quantitatively driven researcher who is studying eating disorders, I might want to first obtain hard numbers on the rates of eating disorders among college students, and in addition I might want to look for demographic differences among these individuals with the goal of testing out several hypotheses on the causes of eating disorders among college students. As a quantitatively driven researcher, I'll ask what the prevalence of eating disorders on the college campus is. This question assumes there is a number "out there" waiting to be found. On the other hand, a qualitatively driven researcher who privileges a more subjective understanding of eating disorders would be interested in the lived experiences of college students with eating disorders. The qualitative researcher would ask how college-aged women experience the stigma of having an eating disorder.

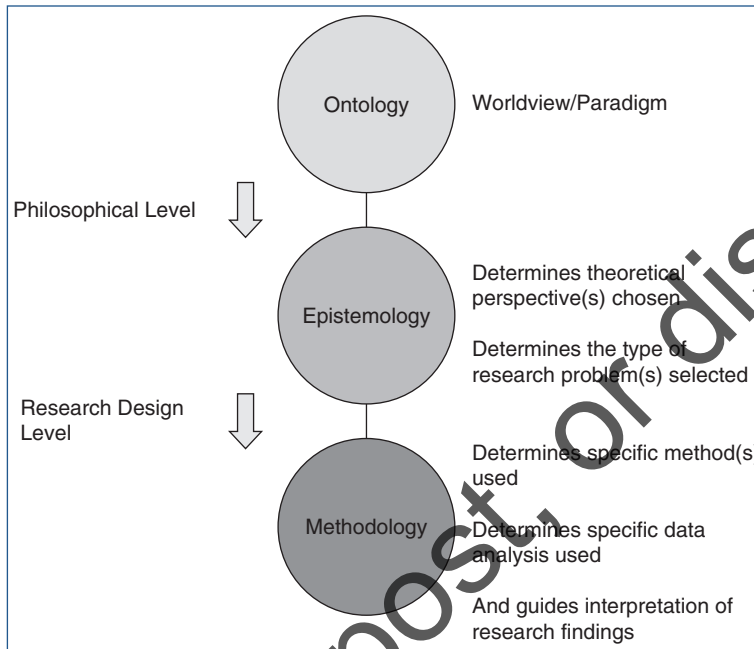
To obtain answers to each of these two questions may require doing an interview, but the type of interview will be different. In order to answer questions about the rate of eating disorders, a close-ended survey that asks specific questions on the frequency of eating disorder behaviors with the goal of gathering statistical data would better fit the goals of this particular study. On the other hand, the second question regarding the lived experiences of college students with eating disorders would use an in-depth interview that allows for open-ended questions whose goal is to get at lived experience.

The critical takeaway from these examples is to note that one's methodology determines and guides the researcher through creating the research design, from question formulation through analysis and representation.

Methodology is the bridge that links a given researcher's paradigmatic assumptions with the overall enactment of a specific research design (methods selected, type of analysis, and interpretation of research data). Figure 1.2 depicts how methodology is a bridge between the *philosophical level* and the *research design level*. A researcher's methodology is shaped by a set of philosophical assumptions that in turn serve to guide the research design process.

In terms of malleability, methodology can be altered during research to the extent in which a researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs allow for modifications. A researcher's conception of subjectivity and objectivity within the research process is likely to influence whether or not he or she will be open to revising methodology once data gathering has commenced.

You may be wondering why a researcher would need to be open to changing his or her 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

FIGURE 1.2 Linkage Between Philosophical Assumptions and the Research


strategy difficult to work with, we realize our methodology is flawed once it has been 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, Ingrid Botting (2006) conducted a study on domestic servants from the 1920s and 1930s who migrated to a mill town in Newfoundland for work. She twice modified her project based on the accessibility of data as well as 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 the significant data to emerge.

Methods

Methods are the tools researchers use in order 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 interrogation) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records. (p. 2)

Qualitative researchers often use one or more of the following data-gathering and analytical 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, 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, what is most important is that there is a tight fit between the purpose or question and the method selected. 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 arbitrarily select a method without considering carefully what kind of data you are seeking is to put the cart before the horse, so to speak. I encourage new researchers to work with a variety of methods so that you will feel comfortable selecting appropriate methods for future projects. The researcher's methodological choices form the *design framework* for a research project.

A Holistic Approach to Research

Our approach to the qualitative endeavor is **holistic**. A holistic approach is attentive to the important connections between the philosophical framework and the design framework. In other words, a holistic approach does not require researchers to disavow their underlying belief systems, but rather to examine how ontological and epistemological perspectives impact methodology. Therefore, a holistic approach views research as a *process* rather than an event. As I hope you will learn throughout this book, this kind of approach is successful in diverse research contexts and provides rewarding experiences for researchers who craft their own projects. Additionally, it is not just the resulting information or research findings that we learn, but 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 represents 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. Moreover, the uniqueness of qualitative practice is partly illuminated by juxtaposing it with quantitative research. These two approaches are compared in Table 1.1.

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

Positivism places 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.

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

Qualitative research is typically **inductive**, although qualitative researchers use **deductive** techniques, for example, in the analysis of their data. This means projects

TABLE 1.1 Some Key Differences Between Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Research Inquiry That Lie Along a Continuum

	Quantitative Approach	Qualitative Approach
	Positivism (critical realism and postpositivism are considered variations on this overall approach).	Interpretative and critical perspectives are two umbrella approaches.
<i>Ontology</i> What is the nature of the social world?	Assumes a truth out there waiting to be found.	Assumes a reality where there are multiple truths and privileges multiple realities and constructivism.
<i>Epistemology</i> What can be known? Who can be a knower?	The social reality is knowable. There is truth out there waiting to be found. Research must be objective and not allow values and attitudes to enter into research inquiry.	The social reality is knowable but subjective. There are multiple truths out there. Goal is to understand the intersubjective nature of reality.
<i>Methodology</i> Theoretical perspective: research questions	<p>Positivist perspective: goal is to describe causal relationships framed with a variable language.</p> <p>Stresses causality and a deductive mode of inquiry.</p> <p>Seeks confirmation through testable hypotheses. Seeks social facts that lie outside individuals' meanings. How is experience shaped by the outside reality?</p>	Interpretative perspective stresses the importance of induction as a mode of inquiry. Seeks to generate theories of the social world. Asks how the world is experienced subjectively by a range of others. Critical theorists would ask question regarding the power relationships that hold dominant socially constructed points of view in place such that they seem to be truths.
<i>Methods Used</i> Analysis and interpretation of data	<p>Emphasizes the importance of quantitative measurement techniques and measures. Emphasis on the creation of variables in order to come up with testable hypotheses.</p> <p>Looks for causal relationships outside of the individual that can predict human behavior. Employs statistical analysis with the goal of generalizing research findings.</p>	<p>Emphasis is on capturing subjective meanings. Seeks research methods that can enable understanding lived reality from multiple perspectives.</p> <p>Uses analytical methods that get at subjective understanding, such as grounded theory, with the goal of generating theory. Interpretative techniques privilege lived experience and retain the worlds of participants' narratives with the goal of getting at the process of a given issue or problem under study.</p>

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 do 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 working mothers'? What are the differences between the experiences of 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 by male and female students?

Knowing the genesis of the type of research question you want to address in your research process will allow you to begin to explore those methods and analytical techniques that will maximize your ability to answer the questions you seek. There are three types of primary research purposes as depicted in Table 1.2: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. *Exploratory research* seeks to investigate an area that has been underresearched. The data garnered are preliminary data that help 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

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.

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.

Illustrations of Qualitative Studies

Here are 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

Binge drinking has recently become the 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, if any, do the minority students engage in excessive drinking? Is this, if at all, a strategy of fitting in or coping with the pressures of being a minority in that context? If yes, how so? 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 minority students are interviewed together. Not only would this provide responses to our initial questions, but the group dynamic is also likely to bring the conversation into areas that we might otherwise not know to tap into. Moreover, the participants can help guide us to select language that is appropriate to “get at” their



Photo 1.2

Understanding the contexts in which minority students engage in binge drinking would be an exploratory research project.

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experiences, which we, at this point, know very little about. 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 minority students in their social environments. This would allow us to observe students in their natural setting, during which we could 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 or 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 we are interested in. 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, observations, or oral history interviews, which 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, their satisfaction, and their 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



Photo 1.3 What is the relationship between media consumption and college women's level of body image satisfaction?

© iStockphoto.com/mediaphotos

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 the magazines make you feel badly, 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 mixed methods 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 as well as how our participants internalize those images.

Knowing your overall research purpose (to explore, describe, or explain) is a critical way to guide your formulating research question that in turn leads to the selection of an appropriate method that is best suited to address this particular type of question. Reflecting on the purpose of your research also ensures that you will have a tight fit between the research purpose, the question, and the method.

What 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? What is a qualitatively driven research problem? How do you formulate a research strategy and research design that will answer a qualitatively driven research problem? How do you execute the plan, and what issues may arise? How do you make sense out of your findings? How do you disseminate the findings? I hope that after reading this book you will have a firm understanding of qualitative research as a holistic process. I 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, I am 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. I hope that the book encourages critical questions along the way.

GLOSSARY

Critical approach. Derived from a philosophical tradition known as the Frankfurt school. It is a point of view onto knowledge building that assumes knowledge is socially constructed and subjective. It is particularly focused on the power relationships and social, historical, and ideological forces that serve to constrain knowledge building and seeks to uncover dominant points of view disguised as universal truths.

Critical realism. A critical realist holds on to a positivist view of the social world, namely that there is a real world “out there” independent of subjective knowledge, and at the same time is aware of and more accepting of the fact that human knowers must still socially construct a view of this world filtered through a subjective (constructivist) lens.

Deductive. Begins with a theory from which a specific set of hypotheses are derived and tested with the goal of confirming basic tenets of the theory.

Epistemology. An epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). An epistemology includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participants 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. Begins with specific data out of which more general ideas or theories are

generated. The goal is exploratory and not confirmatory.

Methodology. Harding (1987) explains that a methodology is a theory of how research does or should ensue. A researcher's particular methodology flows from a set of philosophical assumptions regarding ontological and epistemological beliefs held by the researcher and provides a bridge that brings philosophical assumptions together with research design (methods, analysis, and interpretation).

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.

Paradigm. Thomas Kuhn (1962) introduced the concept of “paradigm” to the scientific community by arguing that the practice of science is usually characterized by a particular paradigm or way of thinking. Kuhn noted that all knowledge is filtered through a paradigm or set of paradigms currently dominant within a particular discipline or field. A paradigm is a theoretically constructed worldview that provides the categories and concepts through and by which science and social science construct and understand the world.

Research methods. Methods are the tools that researchers use in order to gather data. A research method is a technique for gathering evidence. There are also analytical methods tools for analyzing data.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of problems can a qualitative research approach address?
2. 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.
3. Differentiate between the three primary research purposes.

RESOURCES

The Qualitative Report: <http://tqr.nova.edu>

A weekly online journal dedicated to qualitative research since 1990. The report is a peer-reviewed, weekly open-access journal that is free of charge to individuals trying to learn more about qualitative research.

Qualitative Research Consultants Association: <http://www.qrca.org>

This site offers information, educational webinars, articles, conferences, and career resources for individuals interested in qualitative research. QRCA is a not-for-profit association of consultants involved in the design and implementation of qualitative research—focus groups, in-depth interviews, in-context and observational research, and more.

Companion Website: study.sagepub.com/hessebiber3e

The companion website features selected full-text SAGE journal articles and mobile-friendly practice quizzes that align with key concepts from this chapter.



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