

Understanding Forms of Qualitative Research

Learning Objectives

Readers will be able to do the following:

1. Identify various forms of qualitative research.
2. Explain the focus of grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnographic studies.
3. Compare and contrast methods of data collection and analysis used with grounded theory, phenomenology, and ethnographic studies.
4. Describe research products associated with the forms of qualitative inquiry.

Beyond the Basics

The preceding chapters introduced the basic, generic approach to qualitative research. We borrow the term *generic* from Merriam, (1998) who articulates that this is indeed the most popular way to conduct qualitative research. The premise of our text was that the way in which data are collected and analyzed is similar regardless of the form of qualitative study that is performed. Thus far you have learned the basics of inductive analysis that is transferable to all forms of qualitative inquiry. A basic approach to qualitative research is a very pragmatic way to approach the research process.

However, if you want to learn more about qualitative research and to conduct future studies, you should know that many forms of qualitative research exist. In order to be an educated consumer and astute researcher, you must be able to recognize the various forms of inquiry and understand the focus, method, and product of each.

The differences between the forms of qualitative inquiry are quite interesting. We believe Schram (2006) said it best with the following quote: "[w]ays of looking—observing, asking, and examining what others have done—are notably similar across

many qualitative research traditions. Ways of seeing—encompassing underlying intent, guiding concerns, focus, and perspective—are not so similar” (p. 94).

As we explore the common forms of qualitative research, keep in mind that no one way of examining the social world of others is most correct (Holloway, 2005). Indeed, there is a great deal to consider when choosing an approach. The form of qualitative research that you choose depends not only on the purpose of your study and research questions, but also on your philosophical stance and personality (Holloway, 2005). This chapter, therefore, introduces various forms of qualitative research, including grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. It discusses the focus, method, and product of each form, and also lists examples of research purposes and questions for each. The chapter concludes with a small section on forms that are less common, including qualitative case studies, action research, and narrative inquiry.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is an approach to qualitative research that originated in the Chicago School of Sociology between the 1920s and 1950s (Kendall, 1999). Two American sociology researchers, Glaser and Strauss, are credited with bringing direct attention to this method of inquiry. In the 1960s, they created a very systematic way to analyze qualitative data and generate theory (Bluff, 2005).

The initial process for developing grounded theory was termed the *constant comparison method* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is composed of the following distinct stages:

1. Identifying and comparing information or incidents
2. Developing categories and constructing subcategories
3. Delimiting the theory
4. Explaining the theory

These stages, although still used in many qualitative studies today, have been refined. In fact, grounded theory has evolved considerably since the 1960s, largely due to the work of Glaser and Strauss (Hallberg, 2006). However, many authors still refer to grounded theory as the constant comparative method. An article by Mensch and Ennis (2002), for example, utilizes this earlier approach, while the article by Pitney (2002) references a more contemporary method (see appendix A). Regardless of their differences, the research focus is the same in both examples.

? What is a theory and how will I know one when I see it?

Good question! A theory is a set of statements, hypotheses, or propositions that explain a particular phenomenon or process (Ary, Cheser Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Theories come in many forms. Those that are more formal are associated with a label or a researcher's name. For example, Bandura's social learning theory is often referred to as Social Learning Theory. Less-formal theories are displayed as simple statements or hypotheses.

Focus

Grounded theory seeks to explain what is occurring in a social context and aims to develop a theory (Anells, 1996). Therefore, it focuses on social processes. The example of the study by Pitney and Ehlers (2004) focuses on process by examining the way in which athletic training students are mentored. Moreover, the study examined in chapter 2 focuses on how athletic trainers were socialized into their roles in high schools.

Focusing on process generates research questions such as, "How are students mentored to conduct research during undergraduate kinesiology programs?" or "How do exercise physiologists formulate their perceptions of obesity?" A rigorous form of inquiry must be used to generate a theory.

Methods

Grounded theory uses many forms of data, but participant interviews are most common. Alternate but very viable methods are the use of documents (Pandit, 1996) and observations as primary data sources.

The steps for data analysis are very prescriptive and the stages of analysis are clearly identifiable (Glaser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In grounded theory, the researchers concentrate first on coding the available data as they are collected. Coding is the process of identifying and labeling pieces of information, concepts, or experiences that pertain to the research questions. The first stage of this procedure is called *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding involves creating and organizing categories, and is similar to the thematizing process identified in chapter 4.

The categories that emerge from the data during open coding are "an essential aspect of transforming raw data into theoretical constructions of social processes" (Kendall, 1999, p. 745). The process of open coding also identifies subcategories. Constant comparison is an important aspect of this process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the name suggests, researchers continuously compare data codes for similar information in order to create distinct categories.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) identified axial coding as the second stage of analysis. Axial coding is the process of making connections between the categories and subcategories. Researchers must examine several components related to causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions (Glaser, 1978, as cited in Bluff, 2005). Researchers ask the following questions to discover these emerging relationships:

- Do the instances in one category seem to cause or create instances from another category?
- Does the context of the study influence the events or processes that have been discovered? If so, how?
- Are there consequences when an event occurs? If so, what are they?
- Are there contingencies that occur only when another event unfolds?
- When one situation changes, does another change occur?
- Under what conditions do experiences and processes occur?

By asking these questions, researchers identify the relationships between the emergent categories. This process of coding helps researchers conceptualize and explain what is happening with the study's participants.

The selective coding process is the last phase of analysis. In selective coding, researchers identify a core category to which all other categories are related. They develop a set of explanatory concepts when they describe the relationship between other categories and the central category. Thus, the theory emerges (Pitney & Parker, 2002). The creation of theory requires a great deal of thought, logic, and creativity from the researchers as they fully examine relationships in the data.

Products

The name *grounded theory* foreshadows its product—a theory, or set of explanatory concepts, is produced. The product of grounded theory is an understanding of what is happening with an issue under investigation.

The theory must be based, or grounded, in data obtained during the investigation. Although information from previous studies may inform the process, researchers must rely on data from interviews and observations to develop a theoretical explanation of the process which they studied.

Many researchers choose to portray their theories as a model. Models or diagrams can give a visual picture of what has occurred and how events relate to one another.

? May I complete a grounded-theory study without developing a theory at the end?

No! If you follow a specific method, you should hold true to its tenets. You have not finished a grounded-theory study until you have formulated a theory based on the data you collected.

Purpose and Questions

Here is an example of a purpose statement that would direct you toward a grounded-theory study: "The purpose of this...investigation is to understand the process by which clinical decision making is learned by athletic training students" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). A subsequent research question might be: "In what way do interactions with coaches influence the clinical decision making of athletic training students?" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). Appendix A contains an example of a grounded-theory study.

Ethnography

Because ethnography is rooted in anthropology, it may conjure up images of exploring the culture of remote people in a secluded land. From a more contemporary perspective, researchers may find cultures and subcultures everywhere: in hospitals, outpatient rehabilitation clinics, physical education classes, or athletic-training education programs.

Focus

Ethnographic qualitative research involves describing and interpreting a group's culture (Lancy, 1993). Cultural aspects of interest to ethnographers include a group's beliefs,

values, and knowledge. Culture tends to be "coded in symbols, the meaning of which have to be learned, be it language or [behavior]" (Sharkey & Larson, 2005, p. 169).

To clarify the focus further, ethnographic studies attempt to understand how groups create and negotiate meaning, how relationships develop between people, or even how people create and institute policy (Beach, 2005). Additionally, ethnographers hope to identify the structure of a culture, such as whether a hierarchy exists, what the punishments and rewards are like, and whether there are any rituals. Pope and O'Sullivan (2003) conducted an ethnography of sport experiences at a large urban high school. The authors identified and described a student hierarchy and provided insights about the nature of student relationships and roles within the structure of the school.

To learn aspects of a culture, researchers must become part of the group they are studying (Sharkey & Larson, 2005). You cannot learn a culture from the outside looking in, you must examine it from the inside looking around. Culture shapes who we are and how we think. Therefore, when researchers conduct an ethnography, they attempt to truly gain an insider's perspective by learning norms and attempting to understand the "...social world of people." (Sharkey & Larson, 2005, p. 169).

Methods

Many ethnographers will use all types of data, including quantitative data. For example, Pope and O'Sullivan (2003) fully described the high school's size, ethnic profile, and even the attendance at recreation centers within the local community. Combining census data with qualitative data allowed the authors to provide a rich description of the setting.

Fieldwork is the cornerstone of the ethnographic research method, and includes going to the cultural setting to collect data. Ethnographers visit settings and stay for prolonged periods of time to observe and interview. Due to the extensive period of enculturation, researchers may have difficulty gaining access to the environment. The ethnographer, therefore, must be adept at negotiation.

Most ethnographers place more emphasis on observation as a method for collecting qualitative data. Although it is important to learn about participants' beliefs and values by interviewing them, ethnographers want to observe these qualities in a natural setting. The forms of observations discussed in chapter 4 are relevant to ethnographic studies. Spradley (1980), a leading ethnographer, suggests that researchers begin observation by simply describing the physical setting and participants. Descriptive observations will soon lead to focused observations in which researchers deliberately identify what they need in order to answer the research question. Finally, the observation becomes more selective in nature as the researchers identify activities, events, and specific locations for future observations that will address the study's purpose. Think of this process as gaining a sense of the whole before looking at a culture's parts.

Researchers should conduct an open, broad observation before focusing attention on specific aspects to attain the openness of observation associated with ethnography (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997). In other words, researchers should not bring preconceived notions to the task of collecting data. Instead, they must be open to true discovery about how people interact with others in the group (Baszanger & Dodier, 1997).

Another key aspect of the ethnographic method is the use of field notes. Field notes involve logging or documenting what is observed and learned about the cultural setting. Ethnographers also note what their observations mean in the broader cultural context. Bogden and Biklen (2007) describe field notes as "the written account of what the

researcher hears, sees, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (p. 119).

The structure of field notes varies from researcher to researcher, but all must record the following two components:

1. A description of what has occurred
2. What this event means for the broader research purpose

Of all the many forms of qualitative research, ethnography is perhaps the least structured. The quality of being both systematic and flexible is exemplified by ethnography because researchers explore a culture which they do not know. Ethnography has been described as "...an unstructured approach to research where the researcher needs to be explorative and flexible to 'follow the data,' making decisions throughout the research process about what, where, and when data will be collected" (Sharkey & Larson, 2005, p. 169). As personal relationships are discovered and social interactions unfold, the researchers may need more time to understand important facets of the findings.

? I understand that long-term fieldwork is important, but is it possible to wear out my welcome at the research site?

You must remain culturally entrenched until you have gained the insight necessary to thoroughly explain and describe the culture. In this case, time is measured in understanding rather than in hours.

Products

Every form of research has an outcome. In ethnography, the outcome presented in an article is a rich description of a specific culture and the social dynamics that occur. The written presentation of an ethnography is largely in narrative form. As a reader, you should expect rich explanations of the culture or subculture that include information related to the physical environment, interpersonal relationships, hierarchy, rituals, norms, and values of a group.

Purpose and Questions

Here is a brief example of a purpose statement that would lead a researcher toward an ethnographic study: "The purpose of this...investigation is to gain insight and understanding about the culture of learning as it relates to developing clinical decision making skills" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). A subsequent research question might be, "What are the norms and values that guide decision making in this particular clinical culture?" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). Appendix B contains an example of an ethnography.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is both a research method and philosophy. The philosophical base draws from the pioneering works of Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Heidegger (Todres, 2005).

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The philosophical tenets are well beyond the scope of this text, but the final section of this chapter recommends additional sources.

Focus

The focus of phenomenology is how people experience and draw meaning from their worlds. As the term implies, researchers are interested in how participants experience a specific phenomenon. A phenomenological research study focuses on the meaning that several participants assign to a particular experience (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, phenomenology focuses on describing the essence of experience.

The term *essence* means that researchers search for the fundamental nature, real meaning, or core aspects of the phenomenon. The process distills a set of experiences until all that is left is what really matters most, which helps describe a participant's life, world, and perception of a phenomenon.

Phenomena are plentiful in our daily lives. Learning, loving, caring, and hoping are all examples. In athletic training, researchers could frame *loss of function* and *disability* as phenomena and explore the experiences of living with a disability from the perspective of an injured athlete. Goodwin and Compton (2004) conducted a phenomenological investigation to understand the aging experiences of young women with physical disabilities (see appendix C).

Methods

The methods of phenomenology have been described by well-respected researchers, including Giorgi (1985) and Colaizzi (1978). Giorgi explained the phenomenological method as having four steps, while Colaizzi identified 7 steps. Lemon and Taylor (1997) also explained the phenomenological method. We have combined their work to capture the method with the following steps:

1. Bracketing
2. Collecting data
3. Analyzing data
4. Transforming the data
5. Sharing the story (Lemon & Taylor, 1997; Giorgi, 1985; Colaizzi, 1978)

Bracketing

Bracketing means that researchers first attempt to set aside their own beliefs, thoughts, and preconceived notions about the phenomenon under investigation (Byrne, 2001). Researchers bracket so that they can learn about the participants' perceptions without including their own ideas in the study. Lemon and Taylor (1997) describe this process as suspending your previous knowledge of a phenomenon by engaging in a deep self-reflection. As Lancy (1993) suggests, researchers should avoid making assumptions in this type of study. They must enter the process with an open mind to learn the true complexities of a phenomenon.

We suggest writing down your thoughts about the phenomenon. The writing process is closely linked to the thought process, so it is a great way to bracket your perceptions. At the very least, if you identify your biases ahead of time you will recognize them if

they enter the process of data analysis. Take time to search your beliefs and write why the topic is important to you, what you think you know about it, and what experiences you have with it.

Data Collection

Interviewing is the most critical and noteworthy method of data collection in phenomenology (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Researchers collect data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, so they must use very purposeful interview criteria. Once they have identified participants, they conduct an interview or series of interviews.

When interviewing participants, you must cover two broad aspects that are based on the works of Moustakas (1994) and summarized by Creswell (2007):

1. How has the participant experienced the phenomenon?
2. What has influenced their perception of and experience with the phenomenon?

Seidman (1991) advocates conducting three 90-minute interviews with participants. Each interview focuses on a different aspect of the experience:

1. Focused life history
2. Details of the experience
3. Reflection on the meaning

 I am using Seidman's approach to interviewing, but I am not able to conduct a third interview with one of the participants. How should I proceed?

Use any data you have already collected that contributes to an understanding of the past and present aspects of the phenomenon. Be sure to document your change in procedures.

Analyze and Transform Data

The analyzing and transforming steps of the phenomenological process are different, but difficult to separate. The analysis step typically follows a process similar to the one described in chapter 4. In phenomenology, researchers identify any statements made by the participants that provide information about the phenomenon. Phenomenologists next thematize these statements, which are often called *meaning units*. The goal of organizing the meaning units and creating themes is to manage information that will ultimately enable the researcher to describe the phenomenon.

The transforming step attempts to distill the phenomenon down to its essence, or the meaning of the experience. Researchers first describe the participants' experiences based on the emergent themes. Next, they explain how the participants experienced the phenomenon and what it means to them. To transform the data, researchers capture the expressions and language that participants use to describe their experiences. In this process, researchers must ask, "How can I describe what I have learned in a manner that captures its essence and does justice to the participant's experience, yet presents the general meaning of the phenomenon?" (Todres, 2005).

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When entering this final step of the process, researchers must ask and answer this key question: "From the perspective of the participants, how can this phenomenon be described to others?" Researchers must bring the experience to life for the readers with supporting quotes to illustrate the essence of the phenomenon. At this point, researchers must take the results and descriptions back to the participants for review and approval. This practice is very similar to the process of member checking (Colaizzi, 1978).

Products

This form of qualitative research generates a rich and exhaustive description of a given experience and uncovers unknown aspects of the phenomenon. For example, Goodwin and Compton (2004) unveiled a series of paradoxes that occurred in the lives of women with disabilities, including "the belief that a high quality of life is dependent upon physical wellness and independence and what these young women anticipate for their futures as they age" (p. 134).

If your interests lead you toward a phenomenological investigation, we suggest you take the advice of Lancy (1993) and select a complex phenomenon about which little is known and critical questions still exist. An example of a complex topic is the experience of pain, which Dudgeon, Gerrard, Jensen, Rhodes, and Tyler (2002) investigated in their study titled "Physical Disability and the Experience of Chronic Pain." Using a phenomenological method for less complex topics may "capture too much; it is wasteful" (Lancy, 1993, p. 9). In other words, both the researcher and the research would be better served with a different theoretical approach. Therefore, articulate the phenomenon of interest to your colleagues or advisors, who can help you ascertain whether the topic is complex enough to warrant such an intense investigation.

? Do I have to select one approach to qualitative research?

No. Although some researchers have stated that using a specific form of inquiry leads to a higher level of sophistication and may "... convey a level of methodological expertise" (Creswell, 2007, p. 232), we respectfully disagree. You can have a substantial level of rigor and obtain a great deal of insight and understanding with a basic or generic interpretive study. Your expertise and the study's sophistication will be apparent in how you plan and execute the study.

Purpose and Questions

Here is a brief example of research questions and purpose statements that would lead a researcher toward a phenomenological study: "The purpose of this...investigation is to describe the essence and structure of learning to make clinical decisions as an athletic training study" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). A subsequent research question might

be: "How do athletic training students experience and learn clinical decision making?" (Pitney & Parker, 2002, p. S171). Appendix C contains an example of a phenomenological study.

Additional Types of Qualitative Research

This last section focuses on three additional forms of qualitative research. Although they are less common in literature on physical activity and the health professions, you may encounter a qualitative case study, action research study, or narrative inquiry. You should have a basic understanding of each type.

Qualitative Case Studies

Qualitative case studies are intense investigations of a single unit of study, or a bounded system. Examples include one person, one educational program, one school, a single class, a nursing ward, a hospital, or a wellness center.

Merriam (1998) states that researchers may select a bounded system because it is the focus of an identified issue or concern. The bounded system may also be unique in some way. Qualitative case studies use many forms of data to understand what is happening, including observations, documents, and interviews. The product is a rich description of the case and an explanation of how it operates.

Please note that we use the term *qualitative case study* very purposefully. Some case studies, especially in medicine, rely on quantitative data like diagnostic tests to paint a clear picture of what a patient has experienced and how the treatment was effective. Case studies use many forms of data, not just qualitative information. Therefore, you must be very clear about the design you have chosen.

A positive aspect of conducting a case study is that you will not need to work with any participants beyond those involved with the bounded system. In other words, you only need to collect data as it relates to your case. If you decide to conduct a qualitative case study of a unique adapted physical education program for students with multiple sclerosis, you would interview the students, parents, instructors, and administrators. Your observations would be limited to that single program. You would not need to observe other programs or conduct interviews with anyone who is not involved with the case.

A limitation of qualitative case studies is that their findings are rarely transferable. However, you shouldn't feel too apologetic about this limitation. Qualitative case studies tend to focus on unique programs, special concerns, and interesting situations. How they compare to other contexts may be irrelevant; your goal is to vividly describe this case so others can learn about it. Readers can make their own decisions about how to use the findings.

Action Research

Action research is a very practical form of inquiry that is designed to produce a specific outcome, change, or improvement in the very setting in which it is conducted (Stringer, 2004). It is systematically conducted by practitioners, such as clinicians or teachers, to gather information about how procedures are performed (e.g., how

teachers teach or how patients are treated) and how context influences outcomes (Mills, 2007; Stringer, 2004). Stringer (2004) elucidated the following characteristics of action research:

- *Change*. Practitioners work on changing their behaviors to improve their practice.
- *Reflection*. Practitioners reflect on, think about, and theorize about their roles and functions.
- *Participation*. Participants change their own practices and behaviors, not those of others.
- *Sharing*. Participants share their perspectives on the context with others.
- *Understanding*. The study enhances understanding of different perspectives.
- *Practice*. Participants apply their findings to their practice.

Action research most commonly employs qualitative data collection and analysis because of the depth of understanding that can be obtained about a specific context. Remember that the focus of action research is changing and improving practice.

Narrative Inquiry

Researchers use narrative inquiry to gain a deep and rich understanding of participants' experiences. The main method is listening to participants' life stories. Narrative researchers believe hearing the stories of others helps you best understand the meaning that participants assign to their experiences.

Because narrative inquiry focuses on life experiences, some researchers tend to link it with life histories, biographies, and even autobiographies (Schram, 2006). Shank (2006) states that narrative inquiry uses strategies of data analysis that are similar to the grounded-theory method, and sometimes employ formal linguistic analysis. However, as Schram (2006) suggests, narrative inquiry is often viewed as running counter to other methods of analysis that break qualitative data down into codes, and then regroup it to form interpretations. When conducting narrative analysis, remember to share your participants' stories in a way that represents what has occurred in their lives. Consider the holistic nature of their stories by presenting lengthy block quotes that capture the meaning of their experiences.

Summary

Many forms of qualitative research exist. The majority of this text addresses the general approach to qualitative research. Researchers who choose a specific type of qualitative research must attend to its foci, methods, and products. Grounded theory examines social processes and seeks to generate a theory or theories. Ethnography focuses on understanding a particular culture. Phenomenology focuses on how participants have experienced a specific phenomenon. Although these three forms of qualitative research are very common, many additional forms exist. Some researchers mix these forms to achieve a unique research purpose.