

## CHAPTER TWO

# SIX COMMON QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DESIGNS

In fields from education to social work to anthropology to management science, researchers, students, and practitioners are conducting qualitative studies. It is not surprising, then, that different disciplines and fields ask different questions and have evolved somewhat different strategies and procedures. Although *qualitative research* or *qualitative inquiry* remains the umbrella term, writers of qualitative texts have organized the diversity of forms of qualitative research in various ways. Patton (2015) discusses sixteen “theoretical traditions”; some, like ethnography and grounded theory, are familiar classifications, whereas others, such as semiotics and chaos theory, are less common. Creswell (2013) presents five “approaches”: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Tesch (1990) lists 45 approaches divided into designs (such as case study), data analysis techniques (such as discourse analysis), and disciplinary orientation (such as ethnography). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) include a number of chapters on major “strategies of inquiry” (p. xi), such as, among others, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and participatory action research. As this brief overview suggests, there is no consensus as to how to classify “the baffling numbers of choices or approaches” to qualitative research (Creswell, 2013, p. 7).

Given the variety of qualitative research strategies, we have chosen to present six of the more commonly used approaches to doing qualitative research that we have encountered in our many years of experience advising doctoral students, teaching qualitative

research courses, and conducting our own qualitative research: basic qualitative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and qualitative case study. (Qualitative action research, which focuses on solving a problem in practice and implementing change during the research process, is increasingly common; we discuss this in the next chapter.) Because these types of qualitative research have some attributes in common, they fall under the umbrella concept of “qualitative.” However, they each have a somewhat different focus, resulting in variations in how the research question may be asked, sample selection, data collection and analysis, and write-up. There can also be overlaps in these types of research, wherein a researcher may combine two or more, such as in an ethnographic case study. For now, we present these six approaches and then discuss some of the overlaps.

## BASIC QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A challenge especially to those new to qualitative research is trying to figure out what “kind” of qualitative research study they are doing and what their “theoretical framework” is. Our understanding of theoretical framework is discussed at length in Chapter Four, and it is different from what we mean by an epistemological framework; that is, a perspective on the nature of or types of knowledge explored by qualitative researchers. Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon. (This is in contrast to quantitative research paradigms that tend to be based on the belief that knowledge is preexisting, waiting to be discovered.)

In our experience, in applied fields of practice such as education, administration, health, social work, counseling, business, and so on, the most common “type” of qualitative research is a basic interpretive study. Here, researchers simply describe their study as a “qualitative research study” without declaring it a particular *type* of qualitative study—such as a phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis, or ethnographic study. Over the years there has been a struggle with how to label this common qualitative study using words such as *generic*, *basic*, and *interpretive*. Since all qualitative research is interpretive, and “generic” doesn’t convey a clear

meaning, we have come to prefer labeling this type of study a *basic qualitative study*.

A central characteristic of all qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructivism thus underlies what we are calling a basic qualitative study. Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. Meaning, however, “is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. . . . Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–43). Thus qualitative researchers conducting a basic qualitative study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences.

Although this understanding characterizes all of qualitative research, other types of qualitative studies have an *additional* dimension. For example, a phenomenological study seeks understanding about the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon. Ethnography strives to understand the interaction of individuals not just with others, but also with the culture of the society in which they live. A grounded theory study seeks not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest. Narrative analysis uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story. If the unit of analysis is a bounded system—a case, such as a person, a program, or an event—one would label such a study a “qualitative case study.” These types of qualitative research are discussed in subsequent sections of this chapter. To some extent all forms of qualitative research are trying to uncover participants’ understandings of their experiences.

Basic qualitative studies can be found throughout the disciplines and in applied fields of practice. They are probably the most common form of qualitative research found in education. Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. What questions are asked, what is observed, and what documents are deemed relevant will depend on the disciplinary theoretical

framework of the study (see Chapter Four). An educational psychologist, for example, might be interested in understanding the teaching-learning transaction in a classroom, whereas a sociologist would be more interested in social roles and social interaction patterns in the same classroom. The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns that characterize the data. Findings *are* these recurring patterns or themes supported by the data from which they were derived. The overall interpretation will be the researcher's understanding of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Book-length examples of basic qualitative studies are Levinson and Levinson's (1996) study of women's development, based on in-depth interviews with 15 homemakers, 15 corporate businesswomen, and 15 academics, or Tisdell's (2003) study of 31 adult educators and how spirituality informs both their own development and their emancipatory educator efforts as cultural workers. Journal-length examples of basic qualitative research studies can be found in the research journals of most fields. For example, Kim (2014) conducted a qualitative study to uncover the process Korean retirees engaged in in transitioning into a postretirement second career. Fernandez, Breen, and Simpson (2014) examined how women with bipolar disorder renegotiate their identities as a result of experiences of loss and recovery. As another example of a basic qualitative study, Merriam and Muhamad (2013) studied Malaysian traditional healers, identifying the roles they play in diagnosing and treating people with cancer.

In summary, all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings.

## PHENOMENOLOGY

Because the philosophy of phenomenology also underlies qualitative research, some assume that all qualitative research is phenomenological, and certainly in one sense it is. Phenomenology is both a twentieth-century school of philosophy associated with Husserl (1970) and a type of qualitative research. From the philosophy of phenomenology comes a focus on the experience itself and how

experiencing something is transformed into consciousness. Phenomenologists are not interested in modern science's efforts to categorize, simplify, and reduce phenomena to abstract laws. Rather, phenomenologists are interested in our "lived experience" (Van Manen, 2014, p. 26); such a focus requires us to go directly "to the things themselves' . . . to turn toward phenomena which had been blocked from sight by the theoretical patterns in front of them" (Spiegelberg, 1965, p. 658). Phenomenology is a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world; that is, their "everyday life and social action" (Schram, 2003, p. 71). Van Manen (2014) explains it this way: "Phenomenology is the way of access to the world as we experience it prereflectively. Prereflective experience is the ordinary experience that we live in and that we live through for most, if not all, of our day-to-day existence" (p. 28).

Although all of qualitative research draws from the philosophy of phenomenology in its emphasis on experience and interpretation, one could also conduct a phenomenological study by using the particular "tools" of phenomenology. This type of research is based on

the assumption that *there is an essence or essences to shared experience*. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon, for example, the essence of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a participant in a particular program. The assumption of essence, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study. (Patton, 2015, pp. 116–117, emphasis in original)

The task of the phenomenologist, then, is to depict the essence or basic structure of experience. Often these studies are of intense human experiences such as love, anger, betrayal, and so on. Prior beliefs about a phenomenon of interest are temporarily put aside, or bracketed, so as not to interfere with seeing or intuiting the elements or structure of the phenomenon. When belief is temporarily suspended, consciousness itself becomes heightened and can be examined in the same way that an object of consciousness can be examined.

To get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience, the phenomenological interview is the primary method of data collection. Prior to interviewing those who have had direct experience with the phenomenon, the researcher usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions. This process is called *epoche*, “a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment. . . . In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). These prejudices and assumptions are then *bracketed* or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself. Of course the extent to which any person can bracket his or her biases and assumptions is open to debate. This process from phenomenological research, however, has influenced all of qualitative research in that now it is common practice for researchers to examine their biases and assumptions about the phenomenon of interest before embarking on a study.

In addition to epoche or bracketing, there are other strategies unique to phenomenological research. *Phenomenological reduction* is the process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself. We isolate the phenomenon in order to comprehend its essence. *Horizontalization* is the process of laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight; that is, all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage. These data are then organized into clusters or themes. Moustakas (1994, p. 96) explains that in horizontalization, “there is an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon. In the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, nonrepetitive constituents of experience are linked thematically, and a full description is derived.” *Imaginative variation* involves viewing the data from various perspectives, as if one were walking around a modern sculpture, seeing different things from different angles.

The product of a phenomenological study is a “composite description that presents the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon, called the *essential, invariant structure (or essence)*” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82, emphasis in original). This description represents the structure of

the experience being studied. “The reader should come away from the phenomenology with the feeling, ‘I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that’ (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46)” (Creswell, 2013 p. 62).

As mentioned earlier, a phenomenological approach is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences. As an example, Trotman (2006) investigated imagination and creativity in primary school education. He asserts that this phenomenological research revealed “the ways in which these teachers value and interpret the imaginative experience of their pupils” and “suggests particular challenges that professional educators need to address if imaginative experience is to be legitimated and sustained as a worthwhile educational process” (p. 258). In another example, Ruth-Sahd and Tisdell (2007) investigated the meaning of intuitive knowing and how intuitive knowing influenced the practice of novice nurses. In a third example, Ryan, Rapley, and Dziurawiec (2014) conducted a phenomenological study of the meaning of coping in psychiatric patients. These three examples underscore the idea that a phenomenological qualitative study is well suited to studying emotions and affective states.

As with other forms of qualitative research, there are variations in how a phenomenological study is conducted. Moustakas (1994) and Spiegelberg (1965) have both delineated a process for doing such a study that might be helpful to researchers interested in exploring this method. Van Manen’s (2014) recent book also provides some guidelines and also explores various strands and traditions that fall under the umbrella of “phenomenology.” What is important here is understanding that phenomenology as a philosophy has had an impact on all of qualitative research; however, it is also a *type* of qualitative research with its own focus and methodological strategies.

## ETHNOGRAPHY

Of the various types of qualitative research, ethnography is likely to be the most familiar to researchers. Its history can be traced to late nineteenth-century anthropologists who engaged in participant observation in the “field” (for a brief and interesting history, see Tedlock, 2011). Anthropologists “do” ethnography, a research

process, as well as write up their findings as an ethnography, a product. Thus ethnography is both a process and a product. Although ethnography originated in the field of anthropology, nowadays researchers from many fields and disciplines may engage in an ethnographic study. Bracken (2011), for example, conducted an ethnographic study of adult education program planning in a feminist community-based organization in Mexico. There are now many forms of ethnography, including life history, critical ethnography, autoethnography (Muncey, 2010), performance ethnography, and feminist ethnography.

The factor that unites all forms of ethnography is its focus on human society and culture. Although *culture* has been variously defined, it essentially refers to the beliefs, values, and attitudes that structure the behavior patterns of a specific group of people. D'Andrade (1992) outlines the criteria used to determine what is called *cultural*:

To say something is cultural is—at a minimum—to say that it is shared by a significant number of members of a social group; shared in the sense of being behaviorally enacted, physically possessed, or internally thought. Further, this something must be recognized in some special way and at least some others are expected to know about it; that is, it must be intersubjectively shared. Finally, for something to be cultural it must have the potential of being passed on to new group members, to exist with some permanency through time and across space. (p. 230)

Wolcott (2008, p. 22) concurs that culture, which “refers to the various ways different groups go about their lives and to the belief systems associated with that behavior,” is the central defining characteristic of an ethnography.

To understand the culture of a group, one must spend time with the group being studied. As Van Maanen (1982, pp. 103–104) notes: “The result of ethnographic inquiry is cultural description. It is, however, a description of the sort that can emerge only from a lengthy period of intimate study and residence in a given social setting. It calls for the language spoken in that setting, first-hand participation in some of the activities that take place there, and, most critically, a deep reliance on intensive work with a few informants drawn from the setting.”



Immersion in the site as a participant observer is the primary method of data collection. Interviews, formal and informal, and the analysis of documents, records, and artifacts also constitute the data set, along with a fieldworker's diary of each day's happenings, personal feelings, ideas, impressions, or insights with regard to those events.

At the heart of an ethnography is *thick description*—a term popularized by Geertz (1973). “Culture,” Geertz writes, “is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, *thickly*—described” (p. 14). The write-up of an ethnography is more than description, however. While ethnographers want to convey the meanings participants make of their lives, they do so with some interpretation on their part (Wolcott, 2008). An award-winning book-length ethnography by Fadiman (1997) illustrates the power of thick description in a study of a Hmong child in the United States whose medical condition brought about the collision of two cultures' views of medicine and healing. The study also conveys the intensive and sustained immersion in the setting and the extensive data gathering necessary to produce a cultural interpretation of the phenomenon.

Anthropologists often make use of preexisting category schemes of social and cultural behaviors and characteristics to present their findings (see, for example, Murdock, 1983, and Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006). Qualitative researchers in other fields focusing on culture are likely to organize their findings into schemes derived from the data themselves. This is called the *emic* perspective, that of the insider to the culture, versus the *etic*, that of the researcher or outsider. Whatever the origin of the organizing concepts or themes, some sort of organization of the data is needed to convey to the reader the sociocultural patterns characteristic of the group under study. It is not enough to only describe the cultural practices; the researcher also depicts his or her understanding of the cultural meaning of the phenomenon.

Next to basic qualitative studies, ethnographic studies are quite common, and examples can be found in many journals and fields of practice. For example, ethnographic studies have been conducted of a women's flat-track roller derby league (Donnelly,

2014), a healthy Native American Indian family (Martin & Yurkovich, 2014), the Royal Ballet of London (Wainwright, Williams, & Turner, 2006), and Wall Street investment bankers (Michel, 2014). It might also be pointed out that just as is the case with phenomenological qualitative studies, sometimes studies are labeled “ethnographic” because of qualitative research’s historic link to ethnography. However, to be an ethnographic study, the lens of *culture* must be used to understand the phenomenon.

## GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory is a specific research methodology introduced in 1967 by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. As is true in other forms of qualitative research, the investigator as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis assumes an inductive stance and strives to derive meaning from the data. The result of this type of qualitative study is a theory that emerges from, or is “grounded” in, the data—hence, grounded theory. Rich description is also important but is not the primary focus of this type of study.

Charmaz (2000) articulates why Glaser and Strauss’s book was so “revolutionary”:

It challenged (a) arbitrary divisions between theory and research, (b) views of qualitative research as primarily a precursor to more “rigorous” quantitative methods, (c) claims that the quest for rigor made qualitative research illegitimate, (d) beliefs that qualitative methods are impressionistic and unsystematic, (e) separation of data collection and analysis, and (f) assumptions that qualitative research could produce only descriptive case studies rather than theory development. (p. 511)

What differentiates grounded theory from other types of qualitative research is its focus on building theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The type of theory developed is usually “substantive” rather than formal or “grand” theory. Substantive theory has as its referent specific, everyday-world situations such as the coping mechanisms of returning adult students, or a particular reading program that “works” with low-income children, or dealing with grief in the aftermath of a natural disaster. A substantive theory has a specificity

and hence usefulness to practice often lacking in theories that cover more global concerns. Further, grounded theory is particularly useful for addressing questions about process; that is, how something changes over time.

Data in grounded theory studies can come from interviews, observations, and a wide variety of documentary materials. As with other types of qualitative research, grounded theory has its own jargon and procedures for conducting a study. First, data collection is guided by *theoretical sampling* in which “the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes . . . data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop . . . theory as it emerges” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Second, data are analyzed using *the constant comparative method* of data analysis. Basically, the constant comparative method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. The dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to identify patterns in the data. These patterns are arranged in relationships to each other in the building of a grounded theory. (See Chapter Eight for more discussion on the constant comparative method.)

The constant comparative method of data analysis is widely used in all kinds of qualitative studies, whether or not the researcher is building a grounded theory. This perhaps explains the indiscriminate use of the term *grounded theory* to describe other types of qualitative research, or instances when researchers describe using grounded theory guidelines of data analysis and call it “a grounded theory study.” This can be confusing to novice researchers. In fact, Charmaz (2011, p. 360) notes “To date, few grounded theory studies in social justice inquiry demonstrate theory construction. Many, however, show how grounded theory guidelines have sharpened thematic analysis.” The inductive comparative nature of data analysis in grounded theory provides a systematic strategy for analyzing any data set. However, the constant comparative method of data analysis need not result in a substantive theory; we believe that it is best to call a study a “grounded theory study” only when a substantive theory results and is identified based on the data.

Building a substantive theory involves the identification of a *core category*, a third identifying characteristic of grounded theory. The core category is the main conceptual element through which all other categories and properties are connected. Strauss (1987, p. 36) explains that the core category “must be *central*, that is, related to as many other categories and their properties as is possible, . . . must appear frequently in the data . . . and must develop the theory.” In addition to the core category, the theory consists of other categories, properties, and hypotheses. Categories, and the properties that define or illuminate the categories, are conceptual elements of the theory, all of which are inductively derived from or are “grounded” in the data. Hypotheses are the relationships drawn among categories and properties. These hypotheses are tentative and are derived from the study. They are not set out at the beginning of the study to be tested as in quantitative research.

As with other forms of qualitative research, the methodology of grounded theory has evolved over time; recent publications on grounded theory are from a constructionist’s perspective (Charmaz, 2014) and a postmodern perspective (Clarke, 2005). And although originating with sociologists Glaser and Strauss, grounded theory studies can now be found in nearly all disciplines and fields of practice. Al Lily (2014) used a grounded theory methodology to explore how the international academic community of educational technology functions as a “tribe” in the same way that Saudi Arabian Bedouin tribes function culturally, politically, and socially. Stanley’s (2006) grounded theory study of older adults’ perceptions of well-being involved a core category of “perceived control” interrelated with a basic social process of “trading off.” Grounded theory was also the methodology used in a study of rural Latino farmworkers’ reasons for participation in a pesticides exposure study (Hohl, Gonzalez, Carosso, Ibarra, & Thompson, 2014).

## NARRATIVE INQUIRY

“The oldest and most natural form of sense making” is that of stories or narratives (Jonassen & Hernandez-Serrano, 2002, p. 66). Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand

the world around us. We watch news stories on television and the Internet, tell stories of our day at work, and read or view other people's stories through text or film. As Daiute (2014, p. xviii) explains, "The power of narrative is not so much that it is *about* life but that it interacts *in* life. Narrative is an ancient practice of human culture, enhanced today with technologies, personal mobilities, and intercultural connections." Narratives are how we share our daily lives, whether it be through cave drawings in ancient times or in a contemporary context, through Facebook, which Daiute calls "a massive contemporary epic narrative" (p. 2). Stories, also called "narratives," have become a popular source of data in qualitative research. The key to this type of qualitative research is the use of stories as data, and more specifically, first-person accounts of experience told in story form having a beginning, middle, and end. Other terms sometimes used for these stories of experience are biography, life history, oral history, autoethnography, and autobiography.

Since the early 1990s, stories have moved to center stage as a source of understanding the meaning of human experience. Numerous texts on narrative research—such as a five-volume series of narrative studies, the most recent being *The Meaning of Others: Narrative Studies of Relationships* (Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2007), a handbook on narrative analysis (Clandinin, 2007), and the journals *Narrative Inquiry* and *Journal of Narrative and Life History*—have contributed to the popularity of this type of qualitative research. First-person accounts of experience constitute the narrative "text" of this research approach. Whether the account is in the form of autobiography, life history, interview, journal, letters, or other materials that we collect, the text is analyzed for the meaning it has for its author.

Because the "text" of the story forms the data set for what is analyzed in this type of research, the philosophy of hermeneutics, which is the study of written texts, is often cited as informing narrative inquiry. Hermeneutic philosophy focuses on interpretation. Patton (2015) explains:

Hermeneutics provides a theoretical framework for interpretive understanding, or meaning, with special attention to context and original purpose. . . . Hermeneutics offers a perspective for

interpreting legends, stories, and other texts. . . . To make sense of and interpret a text, it is important to know what the author wanted to communicate, to understand intended meanings, and to place documents in a historical and cultural context (Palmer, 1969). (pp. 136–137)

Patton (2002) points out that although hermeneutics “originated in the study of written texts . . . narrative analysis extends the idea of text to include in-depth interview transcripts, life history narratives, historical memoirs, and creative nonfiction.” Further, “the hermeneutical perspective, with its emphasis on interpretation and context, informs narrative studies, as do interpretivist social science, literary nonfiction, and literary criticism (p. 115).” He also notes phenomenology’s influence, as narratives are stories of lived experiences.

As with other forms of qualitative research, narrative inquiry makes use of various methodological approaches to analyzing stories (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Riessman, 2007). Each approach examines, in some way, how the story is constructed, what linguistic tools are used, and/or the cultural context of the story. Biographical, psychological, and linguistic approaches are the most common. In Denzin’s (1989, 2014) biographical approach, the story is analyzed in terms of the importance and influence of gender and race, family of origin, life events and turning point experiences, and other persons in the participant’s life. The psychological approach concentrates more on the personal, including thoughts and motivations. This approach “emphasizes inductive processes, contextualized knowledge, and human intention. . . . [It] is holistic in that it acknowledges the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of meaning making. It also takes into account the biological and environmental influences on development” (Rossiter, 1999, p. 78). A linguistic approach, or what Gee (2014) calls discourse analysis, focuses on the language of the story or the spoken text, and also attends to the speaker’s intonation, pitch, and pauses. Gee offers eighteen questions by which one can build the analysis. Finally, a linguistic approach analyzes the structure of the narrative (Labov, 1982; Schiffrin, Tannen, & Hamilton, 2001). Here, one summarizes the substance of the narrative and identifies the events and their sequence of

occurrence, the meaning of the actions, and the resolution or what finally happens.

The growing popularity of narrative as a means of accessing human action and experience has been accompanied by discussions as to how to best tell people's stories, the role of the researcher in the process, and how trustworthy these narratives are in terms of validity and reliability. Mishler (1995, p. 117) reminds us that "we do not *find* stories; we *make* stories." In fact,

we retell our respondents' accounts through our analytic re-descriptions. We, too, are storytellers and through our concepts and methods—our research strategies, data samples, transcription procedures, specifications of narrative units and structures, and interpretive perspectives—we construct the story and its meaning. In this sense the story is always coauthored, either directly in the process of an interviewer eliciting an account or indirectly through our representing and thus transforming others' texts and discourses. (pp. 117–118)

With so much attention to narrative analysis, there are many examples and variations on this type of qualitative study. For instance, a comprehensive discussion of narrative analysis is accompanied by an example from health geography—that is, how a person's health-related experiences are affected by physical place (Wiles, Rosenberg, & Kearns, 2005); Brockenbrough (2012) afforded his five male participants "multiple opportunities to recount and construct their life stories" as Black queer male teachers in an urban school (p. 746); McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2013) edited a book recounting narrative studies of people at transition points in their lives, such as dealing with divorce in mid-life, transitioning from school to the world of work, recovering from heroin addiction, and so on; in another example, Wilensky and Hansen (2001) had nonprofit executives tell "stories" to uncover their beliefs, values, and assumptions about their work. Finally, Piersol (2014) employed narrative inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of how interpersonal relations might inform outdoor educators' relationship with the land; that is, how participants "listened" to place, thus strengthening ecological relations.

## QUALITATIVE CASE STUDIES

The term “case study” is often used interchangeably with “qualitative research,” especially when researchers new to qualitative research feel pressure to label their inquiry as something more than just “a qualitative study.” However, as with the other types of qualitative research already discussed (phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry), a *qualitative case study* has some defining characteristics that are in addition to what it shares with other forms of qualitative research. Part of the confusion lies in the fact that some case studies employ both qualitative and quantitative methods (see the “mixed methods” discussion in Chapter Three). However, in this chapter on “Types of Qualitative Research” we will limit our discussion to case studies that are exclusively *qualitative* in design. Thus qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive.

Modern case study research has antecedents in anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Further, lawyers, doctors, social workers, and even detectives can be involved in researching a “case.” But it wasn’t until the evolution of qualitative research methods that case studies received attention from a methodological perspective. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, textbooks on research methods were all about variations of experimental designs and statistical methods. Some of these texts included a final catch-all chapter titled “Case Studies” wherein it was acknowledged that there existed the occasional historical or in-depth descriptive study of a phenomenon. By the 1980s, Stake (1988), Yin (1984), Merriam (1988), and others were writing about case study research as a methodology.

A *case study* is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system. Part of the confusion surrounding case studies is that the process of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (the case) and the product of this type of investigation. Yin (2014), for example, defines case study in terms of the research process. “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context



may not be clearly evident” (p. 16). As Yin (2014) observes, case study is a design particularly suited to situations in which it is impossible to separate the phenomenon’s variables from their context. Stake (2005), however, focuses on trying to pinpoint the unit of study—the case. Wolcott (1992) sees it as “an end-product of field-oriented research” (p. 36) rather than a strategy or method.

Of course each of these approaches reveals something about case studies and contributes to a general understanding of the nature of this kind of research. We have concluded, however, that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study: the case. As Stake suggests, “much qualitative research aims at understanding one thing well: one playground, one band, one Weight Watchers group” (2010, p. 27). Further, case study is less of a methodological choice than “a choice of what is to be studied” (Stake, 2005, p. 443). The “what” is a *bounded system* (Smith, 1978), a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. You can “fence in” what you are going to study. The case, then, could be a single person who is a case example of some phenomenon, a program, a group, an institution, a community, or a specific policy. Some examples include Sprow Forté’s (2013) case study of a financial literacy program aimed at Latina mothers, Coady’s (2013) study of the adult health learning of participants in a particular community-based cardiac rehabilitation program in Nova Scotia, and Perry’s (2008) case study of the national health policy of Ghana. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) think of the case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 28). They graphically present it as a circle with a heart in the center. The heart is the focus of the study, and the circle “defines the edge of the case: what will not be studied” (p. 28).

The unit of analysis, *not* the topic of investigation, characterizes a case study. For example, a study of how older adults learn to use computers would probably be a qualitative study but not a case study because the unit of analysis would be the learners’ experiences, and an indefinite number of older adult learners and their experiences using computers could be selected for the study. For it to be a case study, *one* particular program or *one* particular

classroom of learners (a bounded system), or *one* particular older learner selected on the basis of typicality, uniqueness, success, and so forth, would be the unit of analysis. Stake (2006, p. 1) explains:

A case is a noun, a thing, an entity; it is seldom a verb, a participle, a functioning. Schools may be our cases—real things that are easy to visualize. . . . Training modules may be our cases—amorphous and abstract, but still things, whereas “training” is not. Nurses may be our cases; we usually do not define “nursing activity” as the case. “Managing,” “becoming effective,” “giving birth,” and “voting” are examples of functioning, not entities we are likely to identify as cases. For our cases, we may select “managers,” “production sites,” “labor and delivery rooms,” or “training sessions for voters.” With these cases we find opportunities to examine functioning, but the functioning is not the case.

If the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case. One technique for assessing the boundedness of the topic is to ask how finite the data collection would be; that is, whether there is a limit to the number of people involved who could be interviewed or a finite time for observations. If there is no end, actually or theoretically, to the number of people who could be interviewed or to observations that could be conducted, then the phenomenon is not bounded enough to qualify as a case.

Since it is the *unit of analysis* that determines whether a study is a case study, this type of qualitative research stands apart from the other types described in this chapter. The other types of qualitative research—such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, and so on—are defined by the focus of the study, not the unit of analysis. And in fact, since it is the unit of analysis—a bounded system—that defines the case, other types of studies can be combined with the case study. Ethnographic case studies are quite common, for example, wherein the culture of a particular social group is studied in depth. In addition, one could build grounded theory within a case study, or present a person’s “story,” hence combining narrative with case study.

Although our definition of a qualitative case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” is congruent

with other definitions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2005), some readers may find Creswell's detailed definition helpful. For him, "case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a *case*) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving *multiple sources of information* (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case *description* and case-based themes" (2013, p. 97; emphasis in original).

Finally, case studies can be historical, as in the history of an organization or program; biographical, wherein "the researcher conducts extensive interviews with one person for the purpose of collecting a first-person narrative" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011, p. 63); or comparative. Comparative case studies, also called multicase or multisite case studies, involve collecting and analyzing data from several cases and can be distinguished from the single case study that may have subunits or subcases embedded within (such as students within a school). Taylor (2006), for example, wished to explore learning in nonformal community sites. He looked at state parks as one case and home improvement centers as a second case, comparing what the two had in common in terms of planning and instruction of the educational activity. Another example of a comparative case study is Collins's (2001) and Collins and Hansen's (2011) well-known study of what distinguished companies that sustained top performance over fifteen years from mediocre-performing companies. Eleven companies that went from good to great that met rigorous selection criteria were studied in comparison with average-performing companies. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) point out, the more cases included in a study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling an interpretation is likely to be. "By looking at a range of similar and contrasting cases, we can understand a single-case finding, grounding it by specifying how and where and, if possible, why it carries on as it does. We can strengthen the precision, the validity, and the stability of the findings" (p. 33). The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings (see Chapter Nine).

## WHEN THE TYPES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OVERLAP

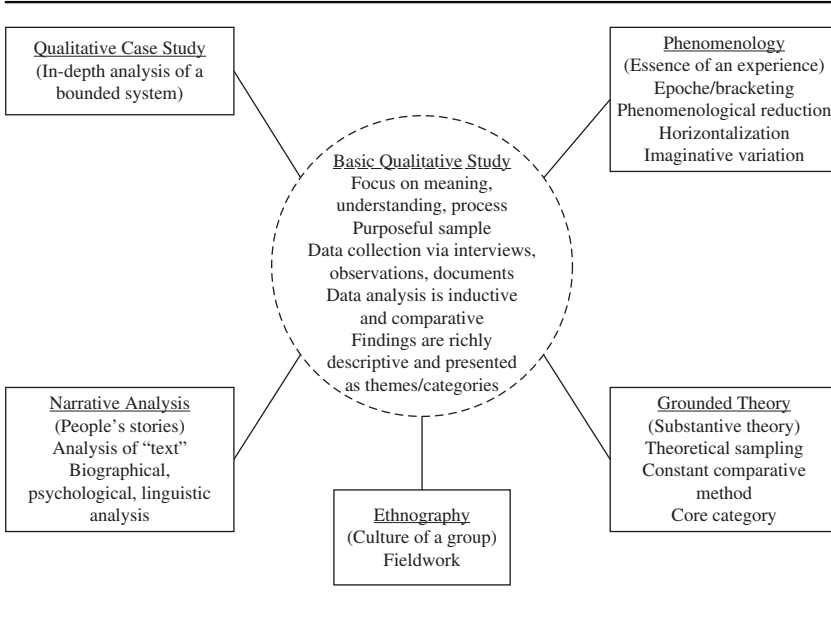
The types of qualitative research we have discussed here are the most common, and they are quite distinct from each other in the ways that we have described. However, there are many more particular types of qualitative research, and some qualitative studies that are a combination of types that we have described above. For example, sometimes a researcher might conduct an ethnographic case study, by focusing on the cultural dimension (ethnography) of a particular program (a specific case). Or a researcher could combine grounded theory with case study. An ethnographic study could also make use of narrative interviews as part of the data collection, which is something that Tedlock (2011) considers in her discussion of narrative ethnography.

There are many ways that a qualitative researcher could design a study. How a researcher does so is determined in part by both the theoretical framework of the study (further described in Chapter Four), and the purpose of the study as shown in its focus and research questions. Given that there is no single correct way to define or describe a qualitative study, it is up to the researcher, in determining how and what to label her study, to make a clear justification, drawing on the qualitative research literature as well as her or his own intentions for the research. There are numerous handbooks, edited books, and textbooks in print that include chapters on various types of qualitative research (see, for example, Clandinin, 2007; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Knowles & Cole, 2007). When determining the specific type of qualitative study for your investigation, it is helpful to examine numerous sources of literature in order to sort out the nuances in justifying your particular selection.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter we briefly discussed six types of qualitative research. These were chosen from among a number of types of qualitative research because they are commonly found in social sciences and applied fields of practice. Figure 2.1 offers a summary of the types of qualitative research discussed in this chapter. A basic qualitative

FIGURE 2.1. TYPES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



study is the most common form and has as its goal understanding how people make sense of their experiences. Data are collected through interviews, observations, and documents and are analyzed inductively to address the research question posed.

The other types of qualitative research discussed in this chapter share exactly the same characteristics of a basic qualitative study, which is why we placed the basic qualitative study in the center of Figure 2.1. However, although each of the other types shares these characteristics, each also has an *added* dimension. A phenomenological study is interested in the essence or underlying structure of a phenomenon; ethnography focuses on a sociocultural interpretation; grounded theory strives to build a substantive theory, one “grounded” in the data collected; narrative analysis uses people’s stories to understand experience; and a qualitative case study is an in-depth analysis of a bounded system.