Chapter One

What Is Qualitative Research?

This book is about qualitative research—what it is, and how to do it. But before we get into qualitative research, and how to do it, whether one is a social scientist, a medical educator, or a public health practitioner, it's important to define what we mean by *research* itself. There are many definitions of research, but what they all have in common is the notion of inquiring into, or investigating something in a systematic manner. In everyday life we talk about "doing research" to inform our decisions and to decide on a particular course of action. For example, when it comes time to buy a new car, you might do some "research" by consulting *Consumer Reports* and a number of Internet sites that rate cars on quality, customer satisfaction, safety, and so on. All of this "research," in addition to test-driving several cars, will enable you to make your decision.

You as a reader probably found your way to this text because you have a more formal interest in research. Research is typically divided into the categories of *basic* and *applied*. Basic research is motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has as its goal the extension of knowledge. Although basic research may eventually inform practice, its primary purpose is to know more about a phenomenon. Al Gore, in his award-winning movie *An Inconvenient Truth*, shares quite a bit of basic research (such as the rate at which the polar ice caps have been melting) as evidence of global warming. This basic research, of course, has implications for what people might do to stem global warming.

Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline. Applied social science researchers, medical professionals, and public health researchers generally are interested in speaking to an audience different from that of basic researchers. They hope their work will be used by administrators and policymakers to improve the way things are done. For example, a public health researcher might undertake a study to find out how healthier school lunch programs are affecting childhood obesity. The findings of this study would then inform legislators revising the policy, as well as school dieticians and administrators whose responsibility it is to implement the policy.

There are many forms of applied research. Evaluation studies constitute one form of applied research common to many in fields of social practice, education, or health care. The difference between evaluation and research, which are both forms of systematic inquiry, lies in the questions asked, not in the methods used, for the methods in each are essentially the same. Evaluation research, including quality improvement projects in health care, collects data or evidence on the worth or value of a program, process, intervention, or technique. Its main purpose is to establish a basis for decision-making, "to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming" (Patton, 2015, p. 18). Other common forms of applied research are action research (sometimes called participatory research), and appreciative inquiry. The focus on these forms of research is on facilitating change; the goal of action or participatory research approaches is to address a specific *problem* in a practice-based setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, an organization, or health care setting (Herr & Anderson, 2015). By contrast, appreciative inquiry is often used in organizational settings to tell stories of what is positive or appreciated and effective in those organizations, to facilitate innovation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) rather than focusing on problems. These kinds of research typically involve the participants in the research process, thus blurring the distinction between change processes and research. Further, while some training in research is helpful, both action or participatory research and appreciative inquiry are often conducted by people who are interested in facilitating change in their work, community, or family. They decide to "experiment" with the situation,

while documenting what happens when trying a new strategy or intervention. Typically, many interventions or strategies are implemented by participants over time. The results and the unfolding process are continually documented, making apparent the process of finding either the most effective solutions to practice-based problems (action research) or what innovations arise when organizations focus on sharing positive appreciative stories among its members (appreciative inquiry).

In its broadest sense, research is a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process. We can engage in this process to contribute to the knowledge base in a field (pure research), improve the practice of a particular discipline (applied research), assess the value of something (evaluation research), or address a particular, localized problem while engaging the stakeholders (action or participatory research).

The Nature of Qualitative Research

Most people know what an experiment is or what a survey is. We might know someone in a weight loss experiment in which some use diet alone, some use diet and exercise, and others use diet, exercise, and an appetite suppressant. This is an experiment to see which "treatment" results in the most weight loss. Randomly dividing participants into three groups will test which treatment has brought about the most improvement. Surveys are also familiar to us, as when we are stopped in the shopping mall and asked to respond to some survey questions about products we use, movies we've seen, and so on. Survey research describes "what is"; that is, how variables are distributed across a population or phenomenon. For example, we might be interested in who is likely to watch which television shows and their age, race, gender, level of education, and occupation.

There are a number of variations on these designs, but basically experimental approaches try to determine cause and effect relationships and to predict results in similar cases in the future. For example, a randomized control trial (RCT) based on an experimental design might want to know what intervention (or set of interventions) might increase the likelihood a patient goes into

remission from a particular type of cancer, and to predict similar results in the future. By contrast to experimental approaches, survey or descriptive designs are intended to systematically describe the facts and characteristics of a given phenomenon or the relationships between events and phenomena. Sometimes these designs are grouped together and labeled "quantitative" because the focus is on how much or how many, and results are usually presented in numerical form.

Rather than determining cause and effect, predicting, or describing the distribution of some attribute among a population, we might be interested in uncovering the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. For example, one may be more interested in how patients perceive that the intervention for their particular cancer affected their relationships or their overall quality of life, and what strategies they used to deal with side effects. Or in another example, rather than studying retired adults to find out the percentage and characteristics of those who take on part-time jobs after retirement, which could be done through a survey, we might be more interested in how people adjust to retirement, how they think about this phase of their lives, the process they engaged in when moving from full-time work to retirement, and so on. These questions are about *understanding* their experiences and would call for a qualitative design. While Braun and Clarke's (2013) distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is somewhat simplified, they write that "the most basic definition of qualitative research is that it uses *words* as **data** … collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways. Quantitative research, in contrast, uses *numbers* as data and analyzes them using statistical techniques" (pp. 3–4, emphasis in original).

Where Does Qualitative Research Come From?

Decades before what we now call "qualitative research" or "qualitative inquiry" became popular, anthropologists and sociologists were asking questions about people's lives, the social and cultural

contexts in which they lived, the ways in which they understood their worlds, and so on. Anthropologists and sociologists went into "the field," whether it was a village in Africa or a city in the United States, observed what was going on, interviewed people in these settings, and collected and analyzed artifacts and personal and public documents relevant to understanding what they were studying. The written accounts of these studies were qualitative in nature. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) point out that Chicago sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized "the intersection of social context and biography" that lies at "the roots of contemporary descriptions of qualitative research as *holistic*" (p. 9).

> In addition, especially in the life histories Chicago School sociologists produced, the importance of seeing the world from the perspective of those who were seldom listened to—the criminal, the vagrant, the immigrant—was emphasized. While not using the phrase, they knew they were "giving voice" to points of view of people marginalized in the society. (p. 10)

In addition to the work of anthropologists and sociologists, people in professional fields such as education, law, counseling, health, and social work have often been interested in specific cases for understanding a phenomenon. Piaget, for example, derived his theory of cognitive development by studying his own two children. Investigative journalism and even the humanities and the arts have also always been interested in portraying people's experiences in specific social contexts.

With regard to the development of what we now call qualitative research, two important mid-twentieth-century publications contributed to its emergence. In 1967, sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Rather than testing theory, their book made a case for building theory from *inductively* analyzing a social phenomenon. This book provided both a theoretical framework and practical strategies for doing this type of research. This book, subsequent work by Strauss and his colleagues, and more recently by Charmaz (2025) continue to define and have an impact on our understanding of qualitative research.

The second publication we would point to as important in defining qualitative research was a monograph by Egon Guba

published in 1978, titled *Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation*. A study was "naturalistic" if it took place in a real-world setting rather than a laboratory, and whatever was being observed and studied was allowed to happen "naturally." In naturalistic inquiry the investigator does not control or manipulate what is being studied. It is also discovery-oriented research, in which the findings are not predetermined.

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a growing number of publications contributing to the understanding of this form of inquiry (see, for example, earlier editions of Guba & Lincoln, 1988; Patton, 2015; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Researchers in many fields outside the traditional disciplines of anthropology and sociology, such as education, administration, social work, and so on, began to adopt qualitative methods. Discipline-specific journals began publishing qualitative studies, and several journals devoted to qualitative research were established.

While medicine and health care have traditionally seen the randomized control trial as the gold standard of medical research which is typically a large grant-funded quantitative study that examines a particular intervention usually with a control group, the past 15 or so years have also seen an increase in qualitative research in the health and medical professions. Nursing and public health have led the way in providing textbooks specifically dedicated to qualitative research in health care with *Qualitative Methods for Health Research* (Green & Thorogood, 2018) and *Qualitative Research in Nursing and Health Care* (Halloway & Gavin, 2024) in their fourth edition and fifth edition respectively. There are numerous journals in medical education, such as *Academic Medicine*, *Medical Teacher*, and *Medical Education* (to name a few), that now publish qualitative as well as quantitative research, and there are now journals that are devoted exclusively to qualitative research in health care, such as *Qualitative Health Research*. Thus, even traditionally quantitative disciplines have caught on to the value of qualitative research for their disciplines.

Today there are hundreds of books on various aspects of qualitative research, as well as journals and regularly held conferences devoted to qualitative research. In fact, there are now numerous paradigms and strategies of inquiry and analysis methods to choose from in designing a study, depending on the study's purpose and

theoretical orientation (Denzin, Lincoln, Giardina, & Cannella, 2024). Although this is certainly good news in terms of presenting the researcher with a rich array of choices for doing qualitative research, making sense of all this material can be a daunting task for novice and experienced researchers alike!

Philosophical Perspectives

In the preceding section we presented a brief sketch of the emergence of what we today call qualitative research. An understanding of the nature of this type of research can also be gained by looking at its philosophical foundations. Unfortunately, there is almost no consistency across writers in how this aspect of qualitative research is discussed. Some talk about traditions and theoretical underpinnings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2011), theoretical traditions and orientations (Patton, 2015); others, about paradigms and perspectives (Denzin et al., 2024), philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), or epistemology and theoretical perspectives (Crotty, 2015). In true qualitative fashion, each writer makes sense of the underlying philosophical influences in his or her own way. In this section we share our understanding.

First, it is helpful to philosophically position qualitative research among other forms of research. Such a positioning entails what one believes about the nature of reality (also called ontology) and the nature of knowledge (epistemology). These are important questions these days and are ever more challenging to answer with the rise of social media that presents ever-changing views on many fronts on the "reality" of many situations. Further, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) begs the question of who or what creates knowledge, and if the knowledge generated by AI such as ChatGPT is really knowledge. While it is beyond the scope of this text to wrestle with these issues generated by technological advances in great depth, these more recent developments indeed affect discussions of both the nature of reality and the nature of knowledge, and are just beginning to be discussed in qualitative research circles (Christou, 2023; Kantor, 2024). We are sure to see further discussions of AI in qualitative research circles in the future.

While most texts on qualitative research do not discuss AI they do address philosophical foundations of this type of research in

contrast to other types of research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Denzin et al., 2024; Patton, 2015). Prasad's (2017) discussion of interpretive, critical, and "post" (as in postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism) traditions is helpful here, as are typologies proposed by Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) and Lather (1992, 2006). Kemmis et al. make distinctions among three forms of research—positivist, interpretive, and critical. To this typology Lather adds poststructural and postmodern, while others also include postcolonial.

A positivist orientation assumes that reality exists "out there" and that it is observable, stable, and measurable. Knowledge gained through the study of this reality has been labeled "scientific," and it included the establishment of "laws." Experimental research assumed a positivist stance, and is what has undergirded much of the research in science, medicine, and the health professions. The rigidity of this perspective has given way to logical empiricism and postpositivism. Postpositivism recognizes that knowledge is relative rather than absolute but "it is possible, using empirical evidence, to distinguish between more and less plausible claims" (Patton, 2015, p. 106).

Interpretive research, which is the most common type of qualitative research, assumes that reality is socially constructed; that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Researchers do not "find" knowledge; they construct it. Constructivism is a term often used interchangeably with interpretivism, and informs not only research in the social sciences but is beginning to have a strong influence in health professions research; indeed, clinicians need to be aware of medical interventions based on large quantitative data, but they also need to be aware of the dynamics of how to interact with patients for quality care. Studying the dynamics of such relationships and how clinicians and patients construct meaning out of those relationships is the subject of interpretive and constructivist frameworks (Kumagai, 2014). Creswell and Creswell (2023) explain:

> Those who hold a constructivist worldview believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their

> experiences…. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views…. Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social constructivism) and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (p. 9)

Those versions that focus more on the role of social interaction and the social context and their role in how individuals construct knowledge is sometimes referred to as constructionism, and Rees et al. (2020) have recently suggested that it is time to reframe academic medicine from a constructionist lens, rather than a postpositivist one, because it could lead to new ways of constructing knowledge and doing research in medical education.

In addition to social constructivism informing interpretive or qualitative research, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism are also important. Philosophers Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz presented phenomenology early in the twentieth century as a major orientation to social science. Patton (2015) explains that "by phenomenology Husserl (1970) meant the study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses. His most basic philosophical assumption was that *we can only know what we experience* by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (p. 116). The experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted. There is no "objective" experience that stands outside its interpretation. Symbolic interactionism, which is most often associated with George Herbert Mead, also focuses on meaning and interpretation, especially that which people create and share through their interactions. "The importance of symbolic interactionism to qualitative inquiry is its distinct emphasis on the importance of symbols and the interpretative processes that undergird interactions as fundamental to understanding human behavior" (Patton, 2015, p. 134).

Creswell and Poth (2025) discuss what they refer to as "transformative approaches" (p. 28) to qualitative research. In such approaches, in general, researchers are concerned about how the research addresses and affects those who are marginalized

by a variety of factors, including race/ethnicity, gender and its orientation, sexual orientation, and national origin. Others who discuss qualitative research refer to such approaches under the umbrella term of critical research.

Critical research goes beyond uncovering the interpretation of people's understandings of their world. Critical research has its roots in several traditions and currently encompasses a variety of approaches. Early influences include Marx's analysis of socio-economic conditions and class structures; Habermas's notions of technical, practical, and emancipatory knowledge; and Freire's transformative and emancipatory education. A basic assumption of critical research is that "all thought is mediated by power relations that are historically and socially constructed" and that "Inquiry that aspires to the name 'critical' must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society" (Kincheloe, McLaren, & Steinberg, 2011, p. 164). Today, critical research draws from feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical ethnography, and so on. In critical inquiry the goal is to critique and challenge, to transform and empower. Crotty (2015, p. 113) writes that "It is a contrast between a research that seeks merely to understand and research that challenges … between a research that reads the situation in terms of interaction and community and a research that reads it in terms of conflict and oppression … between a research that accepts the *status quo* and a research that seeks to bring about change." Those who engage in critical research frame their research questions in terms of power—who has it, how it's negotiated, what structures in society reinforce the current distribution of power, and so on. Zaidi et al. (2021) invite those in medical and health professions education to consider "endarkened" epistemological frameworks that inform research and teaching about issues related to the social determinants of health in patient care and suggests that doing so from a critical perspective might help better serve the interests of those who have been marginalized in the health care system.

A fourth orientation in Lather's (1992, 2006) framework is poststructuralism or postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Research from these "post" perspectives is quite different from the previous three forms discussed, and there are many different

and nuanced discussions of these "post" methodologies (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013); nevertheless, it is influencing our thinking about interpretive qualitative research and also critical research. A postmodern world is one where the rationality, scientific method, and certainties of the modern world no longer hold. According to postmodernists, explanations for the way things are in the world are nothing but myths or grand narratives. There is no single "truth" with a capital "T"; rather, there are multiple "truths." Postmodernists celebrate diversity among people, ideas, and institutions. By accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another. Nevertheless, in these "post" perspectives the intent is to make apparent some of the unconscious but insidious ways in which a colonial or other dominant mindset can assert itself. The point of these "post" research approaches is to disrupt the propagation of such a mindset in some way. Congruent with these "post" perspectives, research informed by any of these post perspectives is highly experimental, playful, and creative, and no two postmodern studies look alike. Grbich (2013) notes that "most forms of qualitative research now have an established postmodern position: for example, ethnography, grounded theory, action, evaluation research, phenomenology and feminist research. Postmodernism favors descriptive and individual interpreted mini-narratives, which provide explanations for small-scale situations located within particular contexts with no pretentions of abstract theory, universality, or generalizability involved" (p. 8). These "post" perspectives are sometimes combined with feminist or critical theory, queer theory, and other critical approaches.

We summarize these four perspectives in Table 1.1. Across the top are the four perspectives just discussed, that is, positivist/postpositivist, interpretive/constructivist, critical, and postmodern/poststructural/postcolonial. Each perspective is viewed in terms of the *purpose* of research from this perspective, *types* of research found within each, and how each perspective views *reality*. This summary table is not meant to be interpreted as a rigid differentiation of these perspectives—in fact, there is overlap in actual research designs and orientations, such as in "critical ethnography" and "poststructual feminist research"—but the table helps point out some of the assumptions. Lather (2006) has her students

Table 1.1. Epistemological Perspectives.

	Positivist/ Postpositivist	*Interpretive/Constructivist*	*Critical*	*Postmodern/Poststructural/ Postcolonial*
Purpose	Predict, control, generalize	Describe, understand, interpret	Change, emancipate, empower	Deconstruct, problematize, question, interrupt
Types	Experimental, survey, quasi-experimental	Phenomenology, ethnography, hermeneutic, grounded theory, naturalistic/qualitative	Neo-Marxist, feminist, participatory action research (PAR), critical race theory, critical ethnography	Postcolonial, poststructural, postmodern, queer theory
Reality	Objective, external, out there	Multiple realities, context-bound	Multiple realities, situated in political, social, cultural contexts (one reality is privileged)	Questions assumption that there is a place where reality resides; "Is there a there there?"

"play" with these categories—asking, "'If this research paradigm were a personality disorder … or a sport … or a drink'" (p. 36), what it might look like or be called—to help them understand the differences on another level. For example, a public event for each of these paradigms could be, for positivist, a marching band or classical ballet, which is precise and rule-dominated; for interpretive, a community picnic, which is cooperative, interactive, and humanistic; for critical, a March of Dimes telethon, because of its concern with marginal groups; and for postmodern, a circus, amusement park, or carnival, because of its multiplicity of perspectives and stimuli and no single reference point.

Differences among these four philosophical orientations as they would play out in a research study can be illustrated by showing how investigators from different perspectives might go about conducting research on the topic of the effects of COVID-19 on health professionals. From a positivist/postpositivist perspective you might begin by hypothesizing that burnout during the pandemic might be why people have left the profession or took a hiatus which has resulted in health care professional shortages. You could then design an intervention program for those health care professionals who left or took a hiatus that might be interested in returning. You set up an experiment controlling for as many variables as possible and then measure the results.

The same topic from an interpretive or qualitative perspective would not test a theory, set up an experiment, or measure anything. Rather, you might be interested in understanding the experience of health care professionals who either left the profession or took a hiatus during the pandemic, or you might be interested in discovering which factors differentiate those who left from those who took a hiatus. You will need to interview those who did so, and review documents such as personal journals or emails that they are willing to share that help get at the process they went through and make a decision.

From a critical research perspective, you would be interested in how the health care system is structured such that the interests of some members and classes of society are preserved and perpetuated at the expense of others. You would investigate the way in which health care institutions are structured, the mechanisms (including time off, wages, rewards, and punishments) that

reproduce certain patterns of response, and so on. You might also design and carry out the study in collaboration with the participants in the study. This collective investigation and analysis of the underlying socioeconomic, political, and cultural causes of the problem is designed to result in collective action to address the problem.

Finally, a postmodern or poststructural inquiry would question and "disrupt" the dichotomies (health care "professional" vs nonprofessional) inherent in the research problem. The "findings" of this postmodern study might be presented in the form of narratives, field notes, and creative formats such as drama and poetry. It would be important to present multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple interpretations of what it means to be a health care professional.

It should be pointed out that these four orientations to research might intersect in various studies. For example, one could combine a poststructural and feminist orientation, as English (2005) did with her analysis of learning in feminist nonprofit organizations; or a critical ethnography, as in Liu, Manias, and Gerdtz's (2012) study of medication communication between nurses and patients during nursing handovers on medical wards.

Getting started on a research project begins with examining your own orientation to basic tenets about the nature of reality, the purpose of doing research, and the type of knowledge to be produced through your efforts. Which orientation is the best fit with your views? Which is the best fit for answering the question you have in mind?

Definition and Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Given all of the philosophical, disciplinary, and historical influences on what has emerged as qualitative research, it's no wonder that the term defies a simple definition. There has even been some debate as to the best term to use—naturalistic, interpretive, or qualitative. Preissle (2006) recognizes the shortcomings of using *qualitative* but concludes that "the label has worked" because "it *is* vague, broad and inclusive enough to cover the variety of

research practices that scholars have been developing. Thus we have journals and handbooks … that identify themselves as qualitative venues while other journals and handbooks have titles such as ethnography or interviewing that represent particular facets of qualitative practice" (p. 690).

Most writers advance definitions that reflect the complexity of the method. Denzin and Lincoln (2013), for example, begin their paragraph-long definition by saying "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible" (p. 6). After several sentences on the practice of qualitative research, they conclude with "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). A more concise though several years older definition that we particularly like is by Van Maanen (1979): Qualitative research is "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (p. 520). Basically, qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*; that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world.

A definition of something as complex as qualitative research is not much more than a beginning to understanding what this type of research is all about. Another strategy is to delineate its major characteristics. As might be expected, different writers have emphasized different characteristics, although there is certainly some overlap. The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive.

Focus on Meaning and Understanding

Drawing from the philosophies of constructionism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism, qualitative researchers are

interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an *understanding* of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience. Patton (2015) explains:

> Qualitative inquiries study how people and groups construct meaning. In so doing qualitative methodology devotes considerable attention to how qualitative analysts determine what is meaningful. Qualitative analysis involves interpreting interviews, observations, and documents—the data of qualitative inquiry—to find substantively meaningful patterns and themes. Doing so is an act of interpretation. (p. 5)

The key concern is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's. This is sometimes referred to as the *emic* or insider's perspective, versus the *etic* or outsider's view. An entertaining example of the difference in the two perspectives can be found in Bohannan's classic, *Shakespeare in the Bush* (1992). As she tells the story of *Hamlet* to elders in a West African village, they instruct her on the "true meaning" of the drama, based on their beliefs and cultural values.

Researcher as Primary Instrument

A second characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is that *the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.* Since understanding is the goal of this research, the human instrument, which is able to be immediately responsive and adaptive, would seem to be the ideal means of collecting and analyzing data. Other advantages are that the researcher can expand his or her understanding through nonverbal as well as verbal communication, process information (data) immediately, clarify and summarize material, check with respondents for accuracy of interpretation, and explore unusual or unanticipated responses.

However, the human instrument has shortcomings and biases that can have an impact on the study. Further, there is a particular theoretical framework or lens that informs a research study

that the researcher makes visible. Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or "subjectivities," it is important to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data. In a classic analysis of subjectivity in qualitative research, Peshkin (1988, p. 18) goes so far as to make the case that one's subjectivities "can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected." Further, postmodernist/poststructural/postcolonial forms of qualitative research strive to make both the researcher's and participants' subjectivity visible (Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). While subjectivity is not the focus of most qualitative studies, it is important for researchers to deal with their own potential influences.

An Inductive Process

Often qualitative researchers undertake a qualitative study because there is a lack of theory or an existing theory fails to adequately explain a phenomenon. Therefore, another important characteristic of qualitative research is that the process is *inductive*; that is, researchers gather data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses as in positivist research. Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field. Bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents are combined and ordered into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general. Typically, findings inductively derived from the data in a qualitative study are in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even theory about a particular aspect of practice.

This is not to say that the qualitative researcher has a blank mind devoid of any thoughts about the phenomenon under study. All investigations are informed by some discipline-specific theoretical framework that enables us to focus our inquiry and interpret the data. However, this framework is not tested deductively as it might be in an experiment; rather, the framework is informed

by what we inductively learn in the field (for more on the role of the theoretical framework, see Chapter Four).

Rich Description

Finally, the product of a qualitative inquiry is *richly descriptive*. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomenon. There are likely to be descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest. In addition, data in the form of quotes from documents, field notes, and participant interviews, excerpts from videotapes, electronic communication, or a combination of these are always included in support of the findings of the study. These quotes and excerpts contribute to the descriptive nature of qualitative research.

Other Characteristics and Competencies

In addition to the characteristics common to all types of qualitative research, several others are more or less common to most forms of qualitative research. Ideally, for example, the design of a qualitative study is *emergent and flexible*, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress. This is not always the case, however, as thesis and dissertation committees, funding agencies, and human subjects review boards often require the design of the study to be specified ahead of time. Sample selection in qualitative research is usually (but not always) nonrandom, *purposeful*, and small, as opposed to larger, more random sampling in quantitative research. Finally the investigator in qualitative research often spends a substantial amount of *time in the natural setting* (the "field") of the study, often in intense contact with participants.

Given the nature and characteristics of qualitative research, the following researcher competencies are desirable:

- *A questioning stance with regard to your work and life context.* Qualitative research is a means of answering questions, so you must first look with a questioning eye to what is happening in your life. Why are things the way they are?

- *High tolerance for ambiguity.* The design of a qualitative study is flexible, relevant variables are not known ahead of time, findings are inductively derived in the data analysis process, and so on. Thus one has to be comfortable with the ebb and flow of a qualitative investigation and trust in the process.
- *Being a careful observer.* Conducting observations is a systematic process, not a casual occurrence; you can increase your skill in observing through practice.
- *Asking good questions.* Interviewing is often the primary data collection strategy in qualitative studies. Getting good data in an interview is dependent on your asking well-chosen open-ended questions that can be followed up with probes and requests for more detail.
- *Thinking inductively.* Data analysis requires the ability to think inductively, moving from specific raw data to abstract categories and concepts.
- *Comfort with writing.* Since findings are presented in words (sometimes also making use of images), not numbers as in quantitative research, a report of a qualitative study requires more writing. The final product is typically longer than a quantitative write-up.

Chapters in this book are designed to help develop these competencies. Chapter Five, for example, discusses how to raise questions that are appropriate for a qualitative study. Chapters on interviewing, observations, data analysis, and writing up qualitative research speak directly to the other competencies.

By way of a summary for this chapter, Table 1.2 displays a comparison of characteristics of qualitative research with the more familiar quantitative approach. Such a comparison helps illuminate some of the basic differences between the two types of research. However, as many experienced researchers can attest, this table sets up a somewhat artificial dichotomy between the two types; it should be viewed as an aid to understanding differences, not as a set of hard-and-fast rules governing each type of research. In the actual conduct of research, differences on several points of comparison are far less rigid than the table suggests.

Table 1.2. Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Research.

Point of Comparison	*Qualitative Research*	*Quantitative Research*
Focus of research	Quality (nature, essence)	Quantity (how much, how many)
Philosophical roots	Phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, constructivism	Positivism, logical empiricism, realism
Associated phrases	Fieldwork, ethnographic, naturalistic, grounded, constructivist	Experimental, empirical, statistical
Goal of investigation	Understanding, description, discovery, meaning, hypothesis generating	Prediction, control, description, confirmation, hypothesis testing
Design characteristics	Flexible, evolving, emergent	Predetermined, structured
Sample	Small, nonrandom, purposeful, theoretical	Large, random, representative
Data collection	Researcher as primary instrument, interviews, observations, documents	Inanimate instruments (scales, tests, surveys, questionnaires, computers)
Primary mode of analysis	Inductive, constant comparative method	Deductive, statistical
Findings	Comprehensive, holistic, expansive, richly descriptive	Precise, numerical

Summary

Qualitative research is a type of research that encompasses a number of philosophical orientations and approaches. The antecedents to what we call qualitative research today can be traced back to anthropology, sociology, and various applied fields of study such as journalism, education, social work, medicine, and law. The 1960s and 1970s saw a number of publications focusing on

the methodology itself, such that by the last decades of the twentieth century qualitative research was established as a research methodology in its own right.

In this chapter we contrasted positivist/postpositivist (quantitative), interpretive (qualitative), critical, and "post" (as in postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial) approaches to research. We also briefly discussed the philosophies that most inform qualitative research, including constructivism, phenomenology, and symbolic interactionism. What all of these philosophies have in common is an emphasis on experience, understanding, and meaning-making, all characteristics of qualitative inquiry. In the final section of the chapter we defined qualitative research and delineated its major characteristics—the focus is on understanding the meaning of experience, the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis, the process is inductive, and rich description characterizes the end product.