Third Edition

The Practice of Qualitative Research

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber

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Third Edition

This book is dedicated to my mother, Helene Stockert.
Her remarkable spirit, wisdom, and love have been invaluable to me throughout my academic career.

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The Practice of Qualitative Research

Engaging Students in the Research Process

Third Edition

Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber
Boston College

SAGE

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
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PART II: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRACTICE

Preface

The third edition of *The Practice of Qualitative Research* continues to be committed to providing students and teachers with a practice model of qualitative approaches to research. Differing from other qualitative methods texts, it provides a problem-centric approach to engaging with qualitative research by linking the practice of any research method to specific research questions. Underscored is the importance of having a "tight fit" between the specific research question and the method or set of methods selected to answer a given research problem. Engaging with a qualitative approach to research that often calls for understanding the lived experiences of research participants requires a range of listening and reflexive skills that calls on the researcher, who is the data collector, to be reflective about the values and agendas he or she may bring into any given research endeavor. To practice research reflexively means to be aware of your own researcher standpoint, that is the set of values and attitudes you bring to any given research project, as well as an examination of those philosophical assumptions you have about the nature of the social world.

The third edition, while remaining true to these goals, also integrates the most current scholarly work in the area of qualitative approaches to research and integrates the use of online methods and computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that can offer students new ways of collecting and analyzing data that allow for the asking of and addressing new questions.

The third edition continues to add to the pedagogical lessons garnered from the collective wisdom and feedback of the students and instructors who have used this book along with those insights I have gained in the teaching of qualitative research during the course of my teaching career.

Major Themes and New Features

Creating a Pedagogy of Engagement

My pedagogical experience in the research methods classroom has been that students need to be engaged with the learning of research methods. It is critical to provide them with a range of hands-on activities that allow them to take learning risks and to apply the more abstract ideas they have learned in the classroom setting in a more formal way. The in-classroom mini exercises in each chapter allow instructors to go "back and forth" with their students while engaging them in reflexive learning through small-group exercise engagements. Students then conduct their own small research projects as a way for them to put together the strands of their learning. Toward that end, the third edition contains a step-by-step process of engagement to offer guidance for students carrying out their research projects using a range of research

methods. There is also a chapter devoted to writing up an entire research project in a step-by-step format that offers students a general research methods project template to guide them through the research project as a whole.

I have observed how critical it is for students to share what they have found difficult in the application of concepts to their own research activities. The in-class mini exercises serve to solidify a student's knowledge and skills regarding a specific method. Each chapter also contains a set of discussion questions that serve to engage students and their peers in the nitty-gritty of issues involved in the practice of a particular method. Instructors and students also have access to methods-specific websites listed at the end of each chapter with an annotated description of each website for further enrichment.

All pedagogical features contained in the book are aimed at engaging students in a *dialogue* aimed to place them in a dynamic communication process whose goal is to challenge their preconceived ideas about how knowledge is built. Creating a dialogue among students involves asking them to interrogate their ideas by tracing their reasoning behind a given perspective or conclusion they reach as they go about learning and practicing new research methods skills. In addition, dialogue encourages students to work together by deeply listening to each other's points of view and to explore and engage with the course material as a whole.

A Practice Model

The third edition continues to provide a *practice model* of learning about qualitative research. This means several things. First, the field of qualitative research is framed as a process. By emphasizing process, students are shown how researchers make decisions along the way that impact the research findings. Second, each chapter offers a *holistic approach* to research. A holistic approach emphasizes the foundations on which research as a whole is based—the text emphasizes the interconnections between research questions and methods. It presents clear examples that illustrate the linkage of theory and methods. Also retained are key features from the second edition. Inspired by Erving Goffman's notion of "back stage" and "front stage," the book again presents "behind-the-scenes" boxes written by leading qualitative researchers. Each behind-the-scenes piece offers students a window into the real-world practice of qualitative research, which at times is messy and unpredictable. Like the other key features throughout the book, these pieces are also a part of our pedagogy of engagement.

Ethical Decision Making

Differing from many research methods texts that only briefly address ethical practice, the third edition of *The Practice of Qualitative Research* continues to center

ethics in social research. The ethics chapter has expanded to include more examples of ethical issues that students are most likely to confront as they go about engaging in their own research projects. Additionally, because the world students live in is rapidly changing due to technological advances, the ethical issues that emerge as a result of Internet research and personal networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are addressed. Finally, issues regarding ethical practice are integrated throughout the methods chapters in the book. I note examples of places where ethical issues emerge in practice with respect to the different methods reviewed in the book.

What's New in the Third Edition?

The Practice of Qualitative Research, third edition, presents a truly comprehensive review of qualitative and mixed methods research. Part I is restructured and renamed "Taking a Qualitative Approach to Research." Chapter 1 presents an invitation to qualitative research. Chapter 2 focuses on approaches to framing qualitative research. For reader ease, I have categorized various approaches under two umbrella categories: interpretive and critical. Perspectives are given equal weight. Under the interpretive umbrella, I review symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, the Chicago school, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology. Under the critical umbrella, I review postmodernism, post-structuralism, feminism, queer studies, and critical race theory. Using clear tables for visual learners helps to illustrate the differences between these approaches. This also demonstrates a larger theme interwoven throughout the book: the integration of theory and methods. Chapter 3 presents qualitative research designs that provide students with an overview of the "nuts and bolts" of qualitative research designs, and Chapter 4 offers an in-depth review of ethical practice drawing on new technology-based examples.

Part II, "Qualitative Research Practice," focuses on a range of specific research methods. Retained are many of the methods chapters from the second edition, and these have been updated to reflect the most current scholarship in the field of qualitative research. New in Part II is Chapter 9, "Researching Mass Media: Images and Text," authored by leading communications researchers Dr. Lisa Cuklanz and Dr. Heather McIntosh.

Part III, "Tying the Strands Together," retains our focus on walking students through the ins and outs of analyzing and interpretation of qualitative data and provides a range of specific examples to illustrate the process of meaning making. The text also provides a range of short exercises for students to practice their analytical and interpretative skills. A newly revised chapter on research writing provides tips for writing up student research projects and contains step-by-step specific illustrations and examples of this process.

The third edition of *The Practice of Qualitative Research* can be used in research methods and qualitative research methods courses. In fact, given the new material, this book can serve as the primary textbook in a survey of research methods course with a smaller supplemental text on purely quantitative methods such as survey research and quasi experiments.

Online Resources

A companion website at **study.sagepub.com/hessebiber3e** offers PowerPoint slides and suggested exam questions for instructors, as well as full-text SAGE journal articles and quizzes for students.

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Finally, I want to thank my wonderful Portuguese water dogs, Zoli and his brother Max. They both remind me of the importance of play in our lives, and they keep me connected to the things that matter to me outside of my work life.

Best wishes,

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Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, PhD, is professor of sociology and the director of the Women's and Gender Studies Program at Boston College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. She has published widely on the impact of sociocultural factors on women's body image, including her book *Am I Thin Enough Yet? The Cult of Thinness and the Commercialization of Identity* (Oxford, 1996), which was selected as one of *Choice* magazine's best academic books for 1996. She published *The Cult of Thinness* (Oxford, 2007) and is coeditor of *Approaches to Qualitative Research: A Reader on Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2004) and *Emergent Methods in Social Research* (Sage, 2006). She is editor of the *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (2nd ed.) (Sage, 2012), which was selected as one of the Critics' Choice Award winners by the American Education Studies Association and was also chosen as one of *Choice* magazine's Outstanding Academic Titles for 2007. She is editor of *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer* (Sage, 2014). She publishes widely on mixed methods research, and her publications appear in *Qualitative Health Research* (QHR), *Qualitative Inquiry* (QI), and *The Journal of Mixed Methods Research* (JMMR). She was appointed an associate editor of JMMR. She is coeditor of the *Handbook of Emergent Methods* (Guilford, 2008). She is author of *Mixed Methods Research: Merging Theory with Practice* (Guilford, 2010). Her most recent coedited book is titled *The Oxford Handbook of Multimethod and Mixed Methods Research Inquiry* (Oxford, 2015).

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She is codeveloper of the software program HyperRESEARCH, a computer-assisted program for analyzing qualitative and mixed methods data, and the new transcription tool HyperTRANSCRIBE. A fully functional free demo of these programs is available at www.researchware.com. This website, www.researchware.com, provides links to a free teaching edition for both programs.

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PART I

Taking a Qualitative Approach to Research

1 An Invitation to Qualitative Research

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

What's Wrong With This Picture?

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

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

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

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

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

What Is Qualitative Research?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dimensions of Qualitative Research

There are many important aspects of research aside from methods, although college-level courses are often misleadingly called "research methods" instead of "research practice." A major dimension of research that is often subjugated is the set of assumptions researchers bring with them that guides the research process. Researchers'

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

Ontology

An **ontology** is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality—what can be known and how. For example, is the social world patterned and predictable, or is the social world continually being constructed through human interactions and rituals? These assumptions represent two very different ontological perspectives. A researcher's ontological assumptions impact topic selection, the formulation of research questions, and strategies for conducting the research.

There are three major ontological positions in qualitative research: positivism, interpretive, and critical. *Positivism* posits that the social world is patterned and causal relationships can be discovered and tested via reliable strategies. The *interpretive position* assumes the social world is constantly being constructed through group interactions, and thus social reality can be understood via the perspectives of social actors enmeshed in meaning-making activities. *Critical perspectives* also view social reality as an ongoing construction but go further to suggest that discourses created in shifting fields of social power shape social reality and our study of it. These ontological approaches are reviewed in-depth in Chapter 2.

Epistemology

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

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

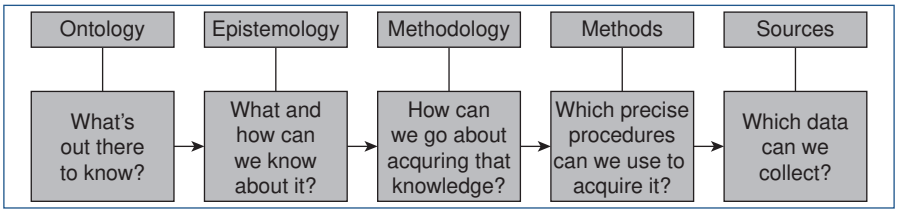
The researcher's ontological and epistemological positions (see Figure 1.1) form the *philosophical basis of a research project* (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This philosophical foundation impacts every aspect of the research process, including topic selection, question formulation, method selection, sampling,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

Methodology

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

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

FIGURE 1.1 The Philosophical Framework of Research Inquiry



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

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

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

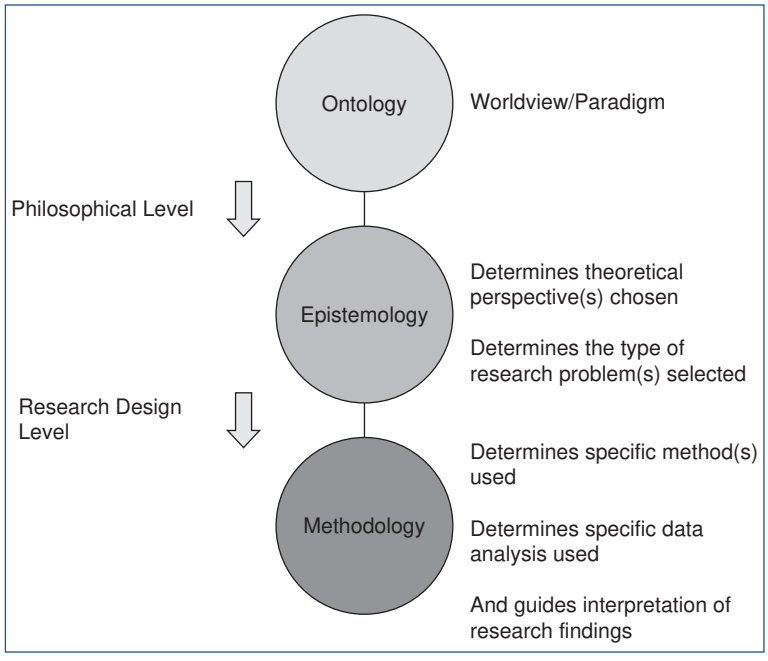
The critical takeaway from these examples is to note that one's methodology determines and guides the researcher through creating the research design, from question formulation through analysis and representation.

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

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

You may be wondering why a researcher would need to be open to changing his or her methodology once a project has begun. Sometimes no matter how much forethought we put into our research design plans, the practice of research gets complicated, and one of the following scenarios occurs: unforeseen issues arise that make the

FIGURE 1.2 Linkage Between Philosophical Assumptions and the Research



strategy difficult to work with, we realize our methodology is flawed once it has been put into practice, we are not eliciting the data we are interested in, or the data we are gathering suggest something unexpected that prompts a reexamination of our study. A qualitative grounding allows for the revision of a methodology as warranted if the researcher's philosophical belief system promotes this kind of fluidity. For example, Ingrid Botting (2000) conducted a study on domestic servants from the 1920s and 1930s who migrated to a mill town in Newfoundland for work. She twice modified her project based on the accessibility of data as well as insights garnered from her early findings, which prompted a reconfiguration. Botting's experience illustrates how important reflexivity is within the research process as well as the process-driven nature of qualitative inquiry (her study combined oral histories and census data). Through a rigorous process of reflection, Botting was able to "listen to the data," as we say, and follow it so that in the end, she, like many qualitative researchers, was able to create a research design that best allowed the significant data to emerge.

Methods

Methods are the tools researchers use in order to collect data. These techniques for learning about social reality allow us to gather data from individuals, groups,

and texts in any medium. Sandra Harding (1987) defines **research methods** in the following way:

> A research method is a technique for . . . gathering evidence. One could reasonably argue that all evidence-gathering techniques fall into one of the three categories: listening to (or interrogation) informants, observing behavior, or examining historical traces and records. (p. 2)

Qualitative researchers often use one or more of the following data-gathering and analytical methods (although this is not an exhaustive list): ethnography or field research, interview, oral history, autoethnography, focus group interview, case study, discourse analysis, grounded theory, content or textual analysis, visual or audiovisual analysis, evaluation, historical comparative, ethnodrama, and narrative inquiry. The diversity of the methods with which qualitative researchers work is one of the distinguishing features of the qualitative landscape, which makes for a vast range of possible research topics and questions. Put differently, qualitative researchers have a lot of tools in their toolboxes. So, how does a researcher select a research method?

When selecting a research method or methods for a particular project, what is most important is that there is a tight fit between the purpose or question and the method selected. Some researchers tend to become comfortable with a particular method or set of methods, and this can lead to a misalignment of research goals and the methods selected to achieve those goals. To arbitrarily select a method without considering carefully what kind of data you are seeking is to put the cart before the horse, so to speak. I encourage new researchers to work with a variety of methods so that you will feel comfortable selecting appropriate methods for future projects. The researcher's methodological choices form the *design framework* for a research project.

A Holistic Approach to Research

Our approach to the qualitative endeavor is **holistic**. A holistic approach is attentive to the important connections between the philosophical framework and the design framework. In other words, a holistic approach does not require researchers to disavow their underlying belief systems, but rather to examine how ontological and epistemological perspectives impact methodology. Therefore, a holistic approach views research as a *process* rather than an event. As I hope you will learn throughout this book, this kind of approach is successful in diverse research contexts and provides rewarding experiences for researchers who craft their own projects. Additionally, it is not just the resulting information or research findings that we learn, but the process itself becomes a part of the learning experience. In this regard and others, qualitative approaches to social inquiry foster personal satisfaction and growth.

Quantitative Research and Positivism

Qualitative research represents one of the two major paradigms (worldviews) from which social research is conducted. Quantitative research represents the other paradigm. Although we hope the research community is moving past polarizing views of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research, comparisons are frequently drawn. Moreover, the uniqueness of qualitative practice is partly illuminated by juxtaposing it with quantitative research. These two approaches are compared in Table 1.1.

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

Positivism places the researcher and researched, or knower and what is knowable, on different planes within the research process. The researcher and researched, or subject and object, are conceptualized in a dichotomous model. Not only is there a rigid division between the subject and the object, but it is also a *hierarchical* division in which the researcher is privileged as the knower. This is particularly important in the social sciences where data are largely derived from human subjects who, under this framework, become viewed as objects for research processes: they are acted on by others—the knowers.

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

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

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

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

frequently begin with the accumulation of specific data, the analysis of which leads to a more general understanding of the topic. Therefore, guiding research questions are generally open-ended, allowing for a multiplicity of findings to emerge. Research

questions typically begin with words like *why*, *how*, and *what*. For example, consider the following sample questions:

- How do people with a racial minority status experience prejudice in their workplace? In what ways does this occur? How does this make people feel? How does this impact work productivity? How does this impact professional identity?
- Why do many working women experience struggles to balance work and family? What is the nature of these struggles? How do working women cope with these challenges? What are the differences between working fathers' experiences and working mothers'? What are the differences between the experiences of white and minority women?
- How do people experience divorce? What does the process entail on an emotional level? What does it mean to uncouple? How does this impact self-concept?
- Why do students binge drink? In what contexts do they binge drink? What kinds of atmospheres promote binge drinking? How is binge drinking experienced by male and female students?

Knowing the genesis of the type of research question you want to address in your research process will allow you to begin to explore those methods and analytical techniques that will maximize your ability to answer the questions you seek. There are three types of primary research purposes as depicted in Table 1.2: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. *Exploratory research* seeks to investigate an area that has been underresearched. The data garnered are preliminary data that help shape the direction of future research. *Descriptive research* seeks to describe the aspect of social reality under investigation. Qualitative researchers conducting descriptive research are typically after what Clifford Geertz (1973) termed "thick descriptions" of social life from the

TABLE 1.2 Research Purposes

Exploratory[a]	Descriptive	Explanatory
Seeks to investigate an underresearched aspect of social life	Seeks to richly describe an aspect of social life	Seeks to explain an aspect of social life

a. Some qualitative researchers refer to this as Discovery.

perspective of those being studied. *Explanatory research* seeks to explain social phenomena and the relationship between different components of a topic. This kind of research addresses the *why* of social life.

Illustrations of Qualitative Studies

Here are qualitative research examples that seek to explore, describe, and explain, respectively. These are meant only as illustrations to get you thinking about how a research purpose is linked to the formulation of research questions, which then informs our methods choices. The researcher standpoint also informs the formulation of research questions, which is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Exploratory

Binge drinking has recently become the topic of considerable conversation at U.S. colleges and universities, and, accordingly, studies on this behavior have been conducted. Let's say we are interested in the experience of binge drinking specifically by minority students at predominantly white colleges. This is an underresearched topic, so our study seeks to explore this topic and gain some preliminary insights into the key issues to help shape future research. These might be some of our research questions: Where do minority students "party" at predominantly white colleges? Do minority students attend predominantly white parties? If so, what is this experience like? What is the drinking environment like? In what contexts do the minority students engage in drinking? In what contexts, if any, do the minority students engage in excessive drinking? Is this, if at all, a strategy of fitting in or coping with the pressures of being a minority in that context? If yes, how so? The best way to answer these questions is to gather data directly from the student population we seek to understand. We might therefore gather data through focus group interviews where minority students are interviewed together. Not only would this provide responses to our initial questions, but the group dynamic is also likely to bring the conversation into areas that we might otherwise not know to tap into. Moreover, the participants can help guide us to select language that is appropriate to "get at" their

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Photo 1.2 Understanding the contexts in which minority students engage in binge drinking would be an exploratory research project.

experiences, which we, at this point, know very little about. Put differently, because there isn't much existing scholarship available about this topic that can help shape our research questions, we need to be open to learning unexpected information from our research participants. Alternatively, we might conduct an ethnographic study, observing minority students in their social environments. This would allow us to observe students in their natural setting, during which we could take in-depth notes based on our direct observations, and we could informally interview research participants.

Descriptive

Now let's say we are interested in understanding the experiences of military spouses coping with having their spouse serving in a war. For this study, we are interested in describing the experiences of military spouses, developing "thick descriptions" of the reality of the lives of people in this situation. These might be some of our research questions: How did you feel when your spouse was called to war? What did you do as a family to prepare for him or her to leave? What did you do individually to prepare? What are the hardest aspects of this experience? How has your daily life changed with your partner away? Describe the details of a typical day now. How has your parenting role changed with your partner away? What coping strategies do you use to deal with the worry, tensions, or pressure? The best way to gather this kind of data is directly from the population we are interested in. Given the sensitive nature of the topic as well as the in-depth data we are after, we might be interested in conducting in-depth interviews, observations, or oral history interviews, which will lead to thick descriptions.

Explanatory

Now let's say we are interested in explaining the relationship between college-age women's media consumption and their body image (the ways in which they think about their appearance, their satisfaction, and their dissatisfaction). Based on our prior knowledge and assumptions, we are specifically interested in associations between media consumption, such as regular reading of women's fashion magazines, and poor body image. For this kind of project we might choose a more structured approach to interviewing

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

where participants are asked a range of specific questions such as these: How do you feel about the way you look? What do you like about your appearance? What do you dislike? Why? How does that make you feel? What television programs do you watch? What do you like about them? Do you read magazines? Which ones? What do you think about the images you see? How do they make you feel? Do you wish you looked more like the models? How so? If the magazines make you feel badly, why do you continue to read them? Do you hang clips from magazines in your dorm? If so, why? How do you decide which clips to hang? How do you feel when you look at them? As an alternative to structured interviews, we might be interested in a mixed methods approach to this research. One way to do this would be to combine survey research designed to get a breadth of responses from college-age women with in-depth interviews aimed at getting a depth of data from fewer participants. Another approach would be to combine structured interviews with a content analysis of the images in a representative sample of women's magazines. This approach would allow us to examine both the images themselves as well as how our participants internalize those images.

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

What to Learn From This Book

This book serves as a comprehensive introduction to the practice of qualitative research. In this vein, after reading the book you should have answers to the following research issues: How do you conceptualize a problem? What is a qualitatively driven research problem? How do you formulate a research strategy and research design that will answer a qualitatively driven research problem? How do you execute the plan, and what issues may arise? How do you make sense out of your findings? How do you disseminate the findings? I hope that after reading this book you will have a firm understanding of qualitative research as a holistic process. I present a practice model of research that goes behind the scenes to show you the complexities that can occur when we seek to better understand the human condition. A practice model encourages the doing of research, understanding that even the best-laid plans may not hold up during the practice of research. In this vein, I am delighted to present behind-the-scenes boxes throughout the book. These boxes were written by leading researchers and take us behind the curtain to the real world of qualitative research, with its messiness, disappointments, ethical dilemmas, and unique joys. I hope that the book encourages critical questions along the way.

GLOSSARY

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

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

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

Epistemology. An epistemology is a philosophical belief system about who can be a knower (Guba & Lincoln, 1998; Harding, 1987; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004). An epistemology includes how the relationship between the researcher and research participants is understood.

Holistic. By *holistic* we mean that researchers must continually be cognizant of the relationship between epistemology, theory, and methods and look at research as a process.

Inductive. Begins with specific data out of which more general ideas or theories are generated. The goal is exploratory and not confirmatory.

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

Ontology. An ontology is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality—what can be known and how. The conscious and unconscious questions, assumptions, and beliefs that the researcher brings to the research endeavor serve as the initial basis for an ontological position.

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

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

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of problems can a qualitative research approach address?
2. Select a possible research topic (perhaps using an example from this chapter such as binge drinking among college-age students). Next, create sample research questions in order to conduct exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research on your topic.
3. Differentiate between the three primary research purposes.

RESOURCES

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

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

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

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

Companion Website: study.sagepub.com/hessebiber3e

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

2 Paradigmatic Approaches to Qualitative Research

Photo 2.1 You can think of a paradigm as a particular window into the social world.

A qualitative approach to knowledge building provides a unique set of interrelated paradigms with which to garner knowledge about the social reality. Paradigms are socially constructed approaches to knowledge building. You can think of a paradigm as a way of seeing the social world that carries with it a particular point of view about the knowledge-building process—what can be known, who can know, and how researchers should go about studying the social world around us. Paradigms are not "real" but instead should be considered useful or not useful lenses for pursuing the research problems and questions you might want to address in your own research. There are *multiple qualitative paradigms* that at their core share some basic assumptions about the knowledge-building process as a whole.

What Are the Major Paradigmatic Approaches to Qualitative Research?

For the sake of simplicity, I classify the primary approaches to qualitative research under three paradigmatic umbrella categories: positivism, interpretive, and critical. Positivism has evolved from a philosophy that usually supports quantitative research. Positivists seek out causal explanations, often phrasing their questions as hypotheses. Quantitative approaches can be used by qualitative researchers as well, especially when they want to test out theories they have generated from their qualitatively driven research. **Interpretive approaches** include symbolic interactionism, the Chicago school, dramaturgy, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology. The interpretive strand focuses on subjective experience, small-scale interactions, and understanding (seeking meaning). Interpretive approaches each developed within specific disciplines (although they are now being used in interdisciplinary contexts). **Critical approaches** include postmodernism, post-structuralism, feminism, critical race theory, and queer theory. The critical strand similarly values experience, understanding, and subjectivity but also critiques these categories. Critical approaches look at how power and hegemonic discourses shape experience and understanding. Critical approaches developed across disciplines, in multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary contexts. These power-attentive approaches also directly challenge binary thinking. There is great variation within and across all of these interpretive and critical perspectives, which is explicated in this chapter.

Table 2.1 compares these major paradigmatic approaches. Typically qualitative research is associated with interpretive and critical paradigmatic perspectives and not the positivist perspectives from which quantitative researchers operate; however, there are occasions of researchers working from positivist approaches in qualitative practice. We have already discussed the tenets of positivism and will now briefly discuss positivism as an atypical approach for qualitative researchers.

TABLE 2.1 Comparing Positivism, the Interpretive Strand, and the Critical Strand

	Positivism	The Interpretive Strand	The Critical Strand
Developed:	Natural sciences	Disciplinary contexts	Interdisciplinary contexts
Focus:	Scientific objectivity	Subjective experience	Power-laden environments
	Reliability, verification, replication	Small-scale interactions	Hegemonic/dominant discourses
		Seek understanding	Resist binary categories
		Meaning-making	Social justice

Positivism

Positivist social thought emanated out of the late 1800s, which saw the rise in rationalist thinking and is often referred to as the scientific method. Perhaps positivism's most basic assumption about knowledge building is that there exists "truth" independent of the research process. A fundamental ontological and epistemological assumption of positivism is that the social world can be knowable and predictable. It is also governed by rules that allow the researcher to discern patterns of behavior. It is therefore possible to posit causal relationships between phenomena usually measured as variables that the positivist seeks to identify and explain. Positivists rely on a more deductive model of logic whose goal is theory testing. They frame their research questions as *hypotheses* that set up causal relationships between variables. An example of a hypothesis might be something like this: the higher the education (a variable that takes on numerical values, for example, from high education to low education), the lower the fertility rate (a variable that takes on numerical values, for example, from high to low) among women.

A key idea of positivist inquiry is that in carrying out a research project, the researcher must practice objectivity. Researchers need to remain *value-free*, a process whereby they remain objective by bracketing their particular values or attitudes toward a given topic and do not intervene in the process of empirical investigation. It is objectivity in the service of knowledge building and not subjectivity or experiential knowledge that is valued. In fact, subjectivity is devalued in this view of knowledge building. You can see, given the assumptions about reality and knowledge construction, that this perspective is more congruent with quantitative analysis; however, some qualitative researchers may also choose to work from this kind of theoretical framework. *Positivism* is a classical term, but more contemporary positivists call themselves "postpositivists" "neopositivists," or "critical realists." All three of these

terms are variations on the classical *positivist* term and share at their core the basic tenets of positivism but differ on some tenets by degree rather than as a sharp break from this classical term.

The Interpretive Strand

This set of diverse paradigmatic approaches to research focuses on understanding, interpretation, and social meaning. Furthermore, interpretive approaches presuppose that meaning is socially constructed via the interaction between humans or between humans and objects. Therefore, meaning does not exist independent of the human interpretive process. Researchers working from interpretive traditions value experience and perspective as important sources of knowledge.

Interpretive approaches are associated with the **hermeneutic tradition**, which is about seeking deep understanding by interpreting the meaning of interactions, actions, and objects. This perspective posits that the only way to understand social reality is from the perspective of those enmeshed within it. Writing his most important work, in the 1920s, titled *Sein und Zei* (*Being and Time*), German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) asserted that understanding is *inseparable from the human condition*. He notes that our understanding of the social world is situated in reflecting on our everyday lives and existence. It is this 20th-century philosophical stance that informs interpretive approaches to research.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism was pioneered by two American sociologists, Charles Horton Cooley (1902) and George Herbert Mead (Morris, 1934). The term was coined by Herbert Blumer (1969), a student of Mead's, and Blumer is credited with carrying forth the tradition of Mead's writing and further conceptualizing and expanding this perspective. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that examines the interaction between individuals, small groups, or individuals and objects. This approach suggests this interaction process is an interpretive and meaning-making endeavor where shared symbols are used to communicate meaning (e.g., shared language, gestures). Symbolic interactionism posits that people act differently with different people in different situations. People also act differently toward the different objects they encounter. The source of these differential actions and reactions is the meaning we attach to particular people, interactions, and objects as well as our perception of those interactions. For example, a religious person responds differently to a necklace with a symbol of his or her religion, such as a cross or Star of David, as compared to a purely decorative necklace. This difference in reaction results from the meaning people assign to the object. According to a symbolic interaction perspective, these meanings develop out of ongoing social interactions. Social meanings are therefore created and

re-created through an interpretive process. In turn, these meanings shape attitudes, influence behaviors, and help people determine how to act "appropriately" in different situations. Symbolic interactionism is interested in questions such as these:

- What meaning do people place on objects?
- How do people interpret facial expressions and gestures as parts of meaning making?

Dramaturgy

Erving Goffman (1959) developed **dramaturgy** as a theoretical approach to research that focuses on people's presentation of self in everyday life. Building on the famous quote, "All the world's a stage and we are but the actors on it," dramaturgy uses the metaphor of theater to understand social life. Dramaturgy examines individual social experiences as a process of performance. Under this conception social reality is conceived in terms of "front stage" and "back stage." Front stage is that which occurs in front of others. Put differently, it is the public self. The back stage is the behind-the-scenes part of life that others do not see. Moreover, dramaturgy views social actors as constantly engaged in the processes of "impression management" and "facework." This means that people are routinely trying to manage how they are perceived by

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Photo 2.2 and 2.3 Back stage and front stage: How do we act out our different personas?

others. Researchers working from this perspective might use observational techniques to address questions such as these:

- How does context impact people's behavior?
- How do people act in embarrassing situations?
- How do people publicly and privately cope with disappointment?

As noted in the preface, Goffman's notion of dramaturgy serves as the basis for the behind-the-scenes boxes throughout this book.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology had its early roots in the 18th century. Phenomenologists were critical of the natural sciences for assuming an objective reality independent of individual consciousness. Phenomenology is closely associated with European philosophy in the early 1900s, most notably in the works of German philosopher Edmund Husserl (Husserl, 1963; see also Heidegger, 1982) and French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1963).

Husserl was interested in human consciousness as the way to understand social reality, particularly how one "thinks" about experience, in other words, *how consciousness is experienced.* For Husserl, consciousness is always intentional, that is, it is directed at some phenomenon. To understand how consciousness operates enables us to capture how individuals create an understanding of social life. Husserl was especially interested in how individuals consciously experience an experience. How is it that we become aware of these experiences? Alfred Schutz (1967), a colleague of Husserl, brought the phenomenological perspective to American sociology and was particularly interested in how individuals process experience in their everyday lives. Phenomenology is not only a philosophy but also a research method for capturing the lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenologists are interested in questions such as these:

- How do individuals experience dying? (Kubler-Ross, 1969)
- How does one experience depression? (Karp, 1997)
- How does one experience divorce? (Kohler-Riessman, 1987)
- How does one experience the bodily aspects of pregnancy? (Pillow, 2006)

For phenomenologists, there is not one reality to how each of these events is experienced. Experience is perceived along a variety of dimensions: how the experience is lived in time, space, vis-à-vis our relationships to others, and as a bodily experience. Phenomenologists use a variety of methods, such as observations, in-depth interviews,

and looking at written accounts of these experiences in materials such as diaries. The following question might come up in an interview situation:

- Can you tell me what it is like to live with depression (terminal illness, an eating disorder)?

In sum, phenomenology is a qualitative approach aimed at generating knowledge about how people perceive experience.

Ethnomethodology

Ethnomethodology was popularized as a qualitative approach in the field of sociology in the 1960s through the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967). Ethnomethodology draws on the phenomenological perspective and is related to phenomenology in that they both focus on the process whereby individuals understand and give a sense of order to the world in which they live. Ethnomethodologists are particularly interested in how meaning is negotiated in a social context through the process of interaction with others. Ethnomethodologists ask questions such as these:

- How do people go about making sense of their everyday lives?
- What are the specific strategies, especially those that appear to be commonsensical, that individuals use to go about the making-meaning process?

To the ethnomethodologist, social life itself is created and re-created based on the micro understanding individuals bring to their everyday social contexts. Ethnomethodologists use a range of methods to go about capturing this process of meaning making that can range from observing individuals in natural settings as they go about their daily routines, to interviews. Ethnomethodologists are especially interested in how individuals engaged in interaction talk about their experiences, asking questions such as the following:

- How is meaning created in everyday conversations individuals have with each other?

The main theoretical tenets of ethnomethodology are congruent with the methods of observation and interview that dominate qualitative practice.

The Critical Strand

Critical is an umbrella term for a large set of diverse qualitative approaches. A *critical approach* is developed in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary context. Having said this, I provide a brief and very general overview of some of the key issues and

beliefs that critical approaches bring to knowledge construction. There are two main strands within the critical umbrella. The first group emerged largely out of theoretical work (postmodern and post-structural). The second are approaches that developed out of the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the women's movement, civil rights movement, and gay rights movement. These approaches—feminism, critical race theory, queer theory—all have a social justice or activist component and have been labeled ethical epistemologies (Denzin, 2005).

Critical approaches assert that we live in a power-laden context. Things aren't just the way they are; they have been constructed and reconstructed within shifting power-laden contexts. Critical theorists are weary of notions of absolute truth and base their concerns on the historical inequities produced by this rigid view of knowledge (espoused in positivism). Therefore, critical approaches reject and challenge binary categories that seek to polarize and essentialize difference. For example, categorizations such as male-female do two things: they oppose two groups, and they imply a similarity or sameness among all the members of one group. This could lead to ideas like "women's experiences," which assumes that all women, regardless of race, social class, sexuality, religion, or nationality, have the same experiences. The traditional scientific process ultimately creates knowledge that is used to maintain (justify, fortify, reconstruct) the status quo in which all those forced to the peripheries of the social system (women, people of color, sexual minorities, and the lower socioeconomic classes) are continually oppressed through the reproduction of hierarchical dominant ideology. Dominant ideology refers to the set of ideas and values put forth by those in power, which maintain the structures on which that power rests (through creating what nondominant groups come to see as a "common sense" set of ideas that everyone is exposed to but in reality this knowledge is socially constructed by dominant groups to benefit their agenda). Critical theory seeks to reflexively step outside of the dominant ideology (in so far as is possible) in order to create a space for resistive, counterhegemonic (counterdominant) knowledge production that destabilizes oppressive material and symbolic relations of dominance. Critical theorists seek

Photo 2.4 Critical theorists often challenge notions of absolute truth.

to access subjugated knowledges—the unique viewpoints of oppressed groups—and often examine the micro-politics of power (Foucault, 1976). As noted earlier, there are many variations within the larger umbrella of critical theory.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism focuses on the prominence of dominant ideology and the discourses of power that normalize this ideology to the maintenance of a dominant world order—locally, nationally, and globally. In particular, the discursive logic that accompanies the postmodern capitalist system is investigated. Frederic Jameson, who has contributed immeasurably to the development of postmodern theory, explains that we must examine the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (also called postmodernity), which is both a moment and a discourse (Jameson, 1991, p. xviii). Antonio Gramsci (1929) explains that people partly consent to their own oppression through the internalization of dominant ideology. In other words, hegemonic authority is maintained because, as Foucault (1976) explains, our ideas become the chains that bind us best. Being social creatures, our ideas are not simply created in our minds but are rather a part of a larger social, political, symbolic, and discursive context with its own materiality. The project of postmodern scholarship thus becomes accessing "subjugated knowledges" in order to transform power relations. Because all knowledge is produced within shifting fields of power (Foucault, 1976), research must be historically engaged (Bhavnani, 1993).

Generally speaking, postmodern researchers aim at creating embodied truths that are not disconnected from the historical material realities that produced them. In this way, knowledge produced from a postmodern approach is grounded in ongoing historical processes and the power-knowledge relations in which it is enmeshed.

Post-structuralism

Post-structural research is a subversive process of breaking down unities (such as meta-narratives) and decentering the locus of research in order to create situated knowledges that challenge dominant ideology. This is necessarily an *engaged* process. One method of pursuing this project is **critical deconstruction**, a method of oppositional reading whereby the goal is to *counter the more visible textual interpretation* by revealing the more subjugated/unconscious textual meaning. During a discussion of the oppression of women within the symbolic and material realms, Luce Irigaray explained deconstruction as follows:

> It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of a discourse while remaining *within* the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence. . . . The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory . . . but of *jamming the theoretical machinery itself*, of suspending its pretension to the production of a

> truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 78; italics added for emphasis)

Post-structuralism is concerned with creating transformational tension within the social system itself, rather than producing knowledge that feeds the system. In this vein Jacques Derrida (1966), who has been at the forefront of changing how researchers think about knowledge and its production, urges a method of critical deconstruction in which that which has been marginalized through social historical processes is transformed into the locus of investigation. Derrida also advocates breaking down unities in order to expose that which has been rendered invisible in dominant discourse.

Feminisms

Feminist perspectives developed out of the second wave of the women's movement as a way to address the concerns and life experiences of women and girls, who, because of widespread androcentric or male bias, had long been excluded from knowledge construction both as researchers and research subjects. Feminism is a political project, which means that one of its goals is to foster social change. Feminists seek to create a more just world for women. Feminist researchers value women's experiences and unearth women's subjugated knowledges.

A guiding understanding within feminism is that gender is a historically and socially constructed category. In general terms, feminism also challenges *dichotomous thinking* and provides alternative ways of thinking about social reality and correspondingly, the research process. Feminists critique the subject-object split that polarizes researchers and research subjects as a false dualism that is inherently flawed, artificial, and ultimately undesirable. The feminist critique of the subject-object split has its roots in earlier feminist efforts to expose and correct the exclusion of women from research in the social and natural sciences. Halpin (1989) importantly links traditional scientific objectivity to a general process of "othering" in which women, people of color, and sexual minorities have been deemed "other" and correspondingly treated as inferior to the traditional white heterosexual male scientist. This process has resulted in systematic "scientific oppression" (Halpin, 1989). A key dimension to this historical routinized exclusion/distortion has been the placing of the researcher on a higher plane than the research participants because the researcher is conceptualized as the knowing party (Sprague & Zimmerman, 1993). Feminism itself has been produced out of historical struggle and seeks to create contextualized and partial truths and avoid the absolutes that have historically oppressed women and other marginalized peoples. Dismantling a dichotomous view of objectivity and subjectivity, feminist objectivity places the two in a dialectical relationship lived throughout the entire research process (Hesse-Biber, 2012, 2014; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, & Yaiser, 2004).

Although there are many feminist perspectives, I briefly recount **feminist standpoint epistemology**, which is a touchstone for many feminist researchers. Derived from Hegel's

Photo 2.5 Feminists seek to create a more just world for women.

master-slave dialectic, and Karl Marx's subsequent scholarship, Dorothy Smith (1974) and Nancy Hartsock (1983) pioneered feminist standpoint epistemology based on the assumption that in a hierarchically structured social world, different standpoints are necessarily produced. For example, the United States has a long history of gender inequality in politics, economics, and so forth. This constitutes an environment that is hierarchically structured along economic, social, and political lines based on the construct of gender. In such a context people have different visions of the world based on the gender categorization that they embody and their corresponding space in the social structure.

Feminist standpoint theorists have primarily focused on the position that women occupy within a social context characterized by a patriarchal sex-gender system. Women, men, intersexual individuals, and transgendered individuals occupy different social positions that produce different life experiences; different access to the economic, cultural, and political reward system; and thus ultimately different standpoints (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Some standpoint theorists argue that women's vision is not only different but in fact more complete and less distorted because they occupy a position of oppression in which they must come to understand their own social position as well as that of the dominant group (Hartsock, 1983; Jaggar, 1989).

Patricia Hill-Collins (1990) has increased our understanding of standpoint as an epistemology and critical methodology by introducing the idea of an **Afrocentric feminist epistemology** that begins with the unique standpoint of black women. In essence, Hill-Collins theorizes that we live in a "matrix of domination" where race and gender are overdetermined in relation to each other, producing a unique standpoint fostered by these interlocking systems of oppression. By accessing the different standpoints within our social world, researchers are able to address new questions and resist—even challenge—former conceptions of truth and the ways of knowing from which they flow. This is referred to as an **intersectionality theory**.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory is an umbrella term for diverse research that developed in a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary context. Critical race theory emerged out of the intersections of feminism, post-structuralism, and legal studies (Ritzer, 2008) as well as the civil rights movement. As with feminism, critical race theory seeks to create a more just world by ending racial inequality and oppression. Critical race theory explains that racism is insidious and normalized. In this vein, critical race theory investigates "hierarchical racial structures of society" and posits that race is a historically and socially constructed category (Denzin, 2005, p. 279). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) suggest that dominant groups racialize different minority groups at different historical moments as a result of changes in social, material, or symbolic context. For example, white America racialized Arabs after September 11, 2001.

Critical race theory can inform methodological practice in many ways. Generally speaking, this approach greatly values experiential knowledge (Ritzer, 2008). In this regard, researchers are interested in accessing the subjugated knowledges of racial minorities. Denzin (2005) posits that racial minorities are never able to escape "the prism (or prison) of race that has been imposed by a racially coded and constraining society" (p. 279). Over the past two decades, critical race theory has also trended toward theories of intersectionality. As noted in the last section on feminism, theories of intersectionality posit that people cannot be reduced to one shared characteristic (such as race) but rather researchers must consider the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nationality. Researchers must therefore be attentive to overlapping and even conflicting identities (Ritzer, 2008; see Patricia Hill-Collins, 1990, for a full discussion of intersectionality theory).

Queer Theory

Like feminism and critical race theory, queer theory is an interdisciplinary, social justice–oriented perspective that seeks equality for the sexually marginalized. J. Michael Ryan (2007) notes that defining queer theory is particularly challenging because queer theory posits that "naming something constitutes a form of closure" (p. 633). With this said, the main tenets of queer theory can be delineated.

Queer theory rejects binary categorizations. Binary categorizations of sexuality and gender polarize difference and reinforce hierarchy. Stein and Plumer (1994) note the following as a main component of queer theory: "A conceptualization of sexuality which sees sexual power as embodied in different levels of social life, expressed discursively and enforced through boundaries and binary divides" (pp. 181–182).

Stein and Plumer are suggesting that heterosexuality is normalized in different arenas (e.g., popular culture, education, religion, health care, the law), and researchers must study sexual discourses in these diverse contexts. In this vein, Stein and Plummer assert all areas of social life are influenced by societal understandings of sexuality and must be interrogated.

Queer theory also problematizes traditional understandings of identity. Queer theorists assert that identity is not fixed but rather historically and socially constructed. Moreover, queer theory rejects essentialist practices that erase differences and ignore the complexity of diversity as the result of multiple shifting and intersecting characteristics (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race, ethnicity). In this regard queer theory challenges more conventional identity politics. Queer theorists typically avoid using minority identity status (such as homosexual or bisexual) because such use reinforces and thus legitimizes these dominant categories.[1]

TABLE 2.2 An Overview of Interpretive and Critical Approaches

	Strand	Goal	Focus
Symbolic Interactionism and the Chicago School	Interpretive	Understanding	Meaning-making through interpretive process of interaction
Dramaturgy	Interpretive	Understanding	The presentation of self in "front stage" and "back stage" contexts
Phenomenology	Interpretive	Understanding	How people experience
Ethnomethodology	Interpretive	Understanding	Meaning-making at the micro level
Postmodernism	Critical	Partial truths	Seeks partial truths and challenges dominant ideologies in postmodern contexts
Post-structuralism	Critical	Partial truths	Subversive practice of breaking down unities and decentering
Feminism	Critical	Social justice	Eradicate gender inequality and unearth women's subjugated knowledges
Critical race theory	Critical	Social justice	Eradicate racial inequality/oppression and challenge dominant constructions of race
Queer theory	Critical	Social Justice	Problematize traditional notions of sexual identity and reject essentialist practices

1. The resistance to minority status identity categories has resulted in conflicts between queer theory and LGBT studies. For a discussion of these tensions, see Karen E. Lovaas, John P. Elia, and Gust A. Yep (2006), "Shifting Ground(s): Surveying the Contested Terrain of LGBT Studies and Queer Theory," in *Journal of Homosexuality, 52*(1/2), 1–18.