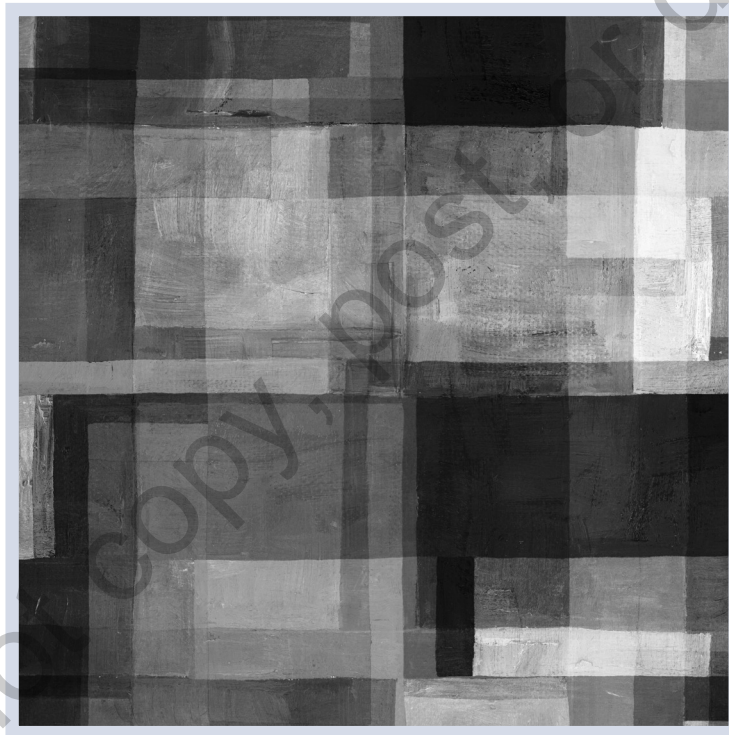


1

Qualitative Research as Learning



©iStockphoto.com/Qweek

To illustrate the complex and often challenging process of learning about qualitative research and learning through qualitative research, we introduce Marla, Ruth, and Anthony, three students in an introductory qualitative research course who learn as they study and participate in the qualitative research process. They illustrate different perspectives and starting points, but each student experiences the tensions and satisfactions of framing questions, listening, watching, reading, and writing.

DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: TALES OF THREE CHARACTERS

Marla is an experienced health care professional who, early in her career, helped build a clinic in a Central American village. She sees herself as an activist and hopes to improve the U.S. health care system for poor women, so she has enrolled at the university to pursue a master's degree in public health. Although she is not certain about the specific aspect of health care that she wants to address, she is sure that the recipients of the care should take part in posing the questions. Her greatest concern is how the people in her study are affected by it; she envisions involving the study participants in seeking the answers and determining how the answers are used. Her experiences as a Latina in the United States have taught her that collaboration can be effective for changing an existing system, so she is attracted to a form of research that includes small-scale experimentation to change circumstances: action research. The possibility that research can be coupled with action appeals to her proactive nature. She believes that the world can be changed for the better.

Anthony has returned to the university for an advanced degree in public policy. On graduation from college, he volunteered as a community activist in a poor urban area on issues of water quality and housing. When funding for this project was cut, he worked as a legislative intern for a congresswoman representing the District of Columbia. She chaired the joint committee on urban renewal and the arts. His interest in evaluations that compare and contrast various programs to explore their effectiveness springs from these experiences. He learned firsthand, when his project's funding was cut, the effects of policy decisions on community members and their advocates. He hopes that his work can inform the policy-making process, especially for people living in poverty, through the provision of more effective, thoughtful, and detailed information.

The youngest of the three, **Ruth**, is an undergraduate majoring in psychology and is an avid athlete. She has been the point guard for the university basketball team and often works out in the gym early in the morning. For the past several summers, she has worked at a camp for children with disabilities. She enjoys working with children, especially through athletics, and has designed a 3-day wilderness course for deaf children. She volunteers 1 afternoon a week at a local elementary school. Ruth's major requires that she take an introductory research course. She has chosen qualitative research because she believes that it will be a way to explore the lives of the children with whom she works. Ruth's interests draw her to a descriptive study.

The characters learn together in a *community of practice*, "a social group engaged in the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise" (Pallas, 2001, p. 7; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991; Meyerhof & Strycharz, 2013; Wenger, 1998). They discuss, argue, and commiserate with each other as they conduct their small-scale studies. Together, they learn that "where the circulation of knowledge among peers and near-peers is possible, it spreads exceedingly rapidly and effectively" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 93). At the end of most chapters, we provide learning activities that you can engage in with your community of practice.

The Characters

Marla, a mature social activist committed to improving health care access for poor women

Anthony, dedicated to policy on income and poverty and using information to better lives

Ruth, deeply engaged in working with young people with disabilities

In their first class, Marla, Ruth, and Anthony have just encountered the confusing array of terms that constitute the vocabulary of qualitative research: *systematic inquiry*, *naturalistic inquiry*, *instrumental*, *interpretive*, *evaluation*, *enlightenment*, *transformative*, and *iterative*, to name just a few. The terms represent various processes, uses, and perspectives of qualitative research, as well as specific approaches to gathering, analyzing, interpreting, and writing up data. Many of the terms and differences in approaches are specialized and subtle. Each, however, helps explicate the following central themes of this book:

- Research should be undertaken to generate knowledge.
- The researcher is a learner, continually and consciously making decisions that affect the questions pursued and the direction of the study.
- Research is a process of conceptualizing, designing, conducting, and writing up what is learned.
- Research is recursive, iterative, messy, tedious, challenging, full of ambiguity, and exciting.

We began this chapter by introducing three students whose learning and small-scale studies illustrate the complex (and often confusing) but rewarding world of qualitative research. Next we address the question of what qualitative research is, describing its goals and common features. Then we examine what qualitative researchers actually do in the process. We end the chapter with an overview of the rest of the book.

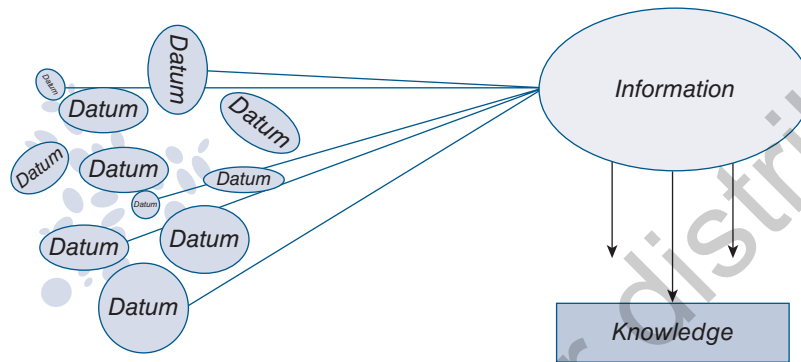
DEFINING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research begins with questions; its *ultimate purpose is learning*. To inform the questions, the researcher collects data, the basic units or building blocks of information. Data are images, sounds, words, and numbers. When data are grouped into patterns, they become information. When information is interpreted and put to use or applied, it becomes knowledge (see Figure 1.1).

Learning has occurred. The process is analogous to building a house. Like data, cinder blocks are not particularly useful by themselves, but they can be placed together to make a wall. Like information, the wall can be used to build a house.

Both you, the researcher, and the builder start with questions and end with a product to be used. Research questions are seldom simple, however, and use takes complex forms. Some uses are intended, some are not. We are concerned that expending resources to support research too often results in reports sitting on shelves and articles languishing unread in academic journals. Our position is that research should be conducted with explicit goals for use. Research should have *the goal of contributing to improving the human condition*, whatever form that may take (see, especially, Crano, Brewer, & Lac,

Data are images, sounds, words, and numbers.

FIGURE 1.1 Building Blocks of Knowledge

2015; Hostetler, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). We take on the issues of multiple use later in this chapter, arguing that the many ways in which knowledge is used are all forms of learning—the central theme of this book.

Qualitative researchers seek answers to their questions in the real world. As you undertake a qualitative project, you will gather data (what you see, hear, and read) from people and places, events, and activities. You will do this in natural settings rather than in a laboratory or through written surveys. We hope that your purpose will be to learn about some aspect of the social world and to generate new understandings that can then be used. Qualitative researchers are central to this process, continually making choices, testing assumptions, and reshaping their questions. As the inquiry process grows from curiosity or wonder to understanding and knowledge building, the researcher may well be transformed. In many cases, the participants change as well. Historically, the individuals who take part in a research study have been referred to as *subjects*, *respondents*, and *informants*. Increasingly, qualitative researchers choose the more inclusive and democratic term *participants*.

Qualitative research has two unique features: (1) *the researcher is the means through which the study is conducted* and (2) *the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world*. Both of these characteristics are integral to a view of learning that sees the learner as a constructor of knowledge rather than as a receiver. From this perspective, you accumulate data—not reality itself but rather representations of reality. You then transform these data, through analysis and interpretation, into information. When put to practical use—to address recurring social issues—information becomes knowledge.

The transformation of information into knowledge is an *active learning process*. Qualitative researchers are learners, and qualitative inquiry provides the detailed and rich data for this learning process. The learner (the researcher—you) makes choices that shape and are shaped by the emerging processes of inquiry. This notion of the interrelatedness of purpose and process underlies the central themes of this book.

Traditionally, differing purposes distinguish basic research (a term borrowed from the natural sciences) from applied research. *Basic research* aims to generate theory and produce knowledge for its own end, whereas *applied research* aims to inform action and enhance decision making. Basic research is judged by the theoretical explanations it provides; applied research is judged by its effectiveness in helping policymakers, practitioners, and the participants themselves make decisions and act to improve circumstances. Our position is that social scientists rarely engage in basic research, although their findings may, and often do contribute to theory. As a qualitative researcher, you will depict some aspect of the human condition, so your research will be quintessentially applied. The distinction between applied and basic research is neither clear-cut nor precise. For example, scientists may conduct research that leads to some direct practical application, and social scientists may conduct research that contributes to theory.

Qualitative inquiry is rooted in *empiricism*—that is, the philosophical tradition that posits that knowledge is obtained by direct experience through the physical senses. Perhaps one of the first qualitative researchers was Aristotle, who made sense of the world by watching and listening. He proposed that ideas are concepts derived from experience with actual objects, beings, and events. Aristotle taught that nothing exists in our minds that we have not first perceived with or experienced through our senses. We then use cognitive reasoning to organize and imbue those experiences with meaning—to make sense of the sensory experiences. For example, we group what we have seen or heard into categories based on characteristics of sights and sounds. At the same time, qualitative researchers also are influenced by the Platonic view that knowledge residing a priori within our minds shapes the images we receive. Thus, we argue that qualitative researchers combine their direct experience with their existing understandings, through complex reasoning, to make sense of the worlds they explore. In essence, qualitative researchers are constructivists; they interpret what they see, hear, and read in the worlds around them.

Qualitative research is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena. The approach is *naturalistic* and *interpretive*, and it draws on multiple methods of inquiry (see, e.g., Flick, 2014; Patton, 2015; Silverman, 2010). That is, qualitative research is conducted in natural settings rather than in controlled ones. It assumes that humans use what they see, hear, and feel to make meaning of social phenomena, and it relies on a variety of data-gathering techniques. It is “research that represents human beings as whole persons living in dynamic, complex social arrangements” (Rogers, 2000, p. 51). Historically, qualitative research has been associated with various social science disciplines: cultural or social anthropology, qualitative sociology, history, organizational behavior, and so on. Despite psychology’s more recent preference for objectivity and mathematical models, major contributions to that field were discovered through classical qualitative case studies—for example, those conducted by Breuer and Freud (1885/1955), Erikson (1958, 1963), Piaget (1948), Allport (1937), and Lewin (1948). Qualitative research also has clear roots in certain philosophical traditions, notably *phenomenology* (questioning the

structure and essence of lived experience) and *hermeneutics* (questioning the conditions that shape interpretations of human acts or products).

These well-established approaches to qualitative research draw on theoretical bodies of knowledge that are traditionally associated with the formal, academic world. Recently, researchers have begun to use approaches to analyzing text that derive from literary criticism and cultural studies. In the latter, *text* refers to more than written words. Construed quite broadly, text embraces all utterances or artifacts of a culture. Writ somewhat smaller, it means the authored words, written and oral, produced in particular social milieu and therefore available for analysis. Yet other researchers conduct studies that espouse explicitly ideological positions, such as feminist, critical theory, postcolonial, or queer studies. These newer approaches challenge the assumption that knowledge is generated exclusively through the traditional academic disciplines. The goal of these researchers is to validate alternative sources of knowledge; they often write about creating opportunities for those previously excluded from formal, academic discourse, such as women, people of color, or gay people, to share their experiences and insights (often critical of the status quo). The qualitative inquiry umbrella covers a continuum from more traditional approaches (often associated with an academic discipline) to cutting-edge experimental approaches.

In subsequent chapters, we more fully describe the various traditions that have shaped qualitative inquiry, and we discuss the assumptions driving these various approaches. For now, we depict what the different members of the qualitative research community have in common. We ask the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of qualitative research?
- What perspectives do qualitative researchers share?
- What stances do qualitative researchers typically take?
- How do they go about their work?

First, to situate the discussion of characteristics, we note that the approaches to research this book presents differ from research approaches that are based on the traditional quantitative *epistemology* (way of knowing the world). Most of us have been socialized to accept a generally positivist view of science that asserts a physical and social reality independent of those who experience it, a reality that can be tested and defined objectively (i.e., free from any distortions brought by observer bias). Positivist views argue that how we learn about reality is by testing hypotheses (predictive statements grounded in a theory or speculation about how two or more variables are related) through experiments, quasi-experiments, or correlations. Researchers using these designs assume that they can control (or seek to control) the various influences affecting the variables by defining the conditions in which an intervention or treatment is applied. They also may compare groups that receive an intervention or treatment with other groups that do not

(these are called control groups). Participants (called subjects) are chosen through statistically determined methods. Such research seeks outcomes that are measurable with a number, such as a score, rating, or amount.

In contrast, qualitative research represents a very different, more interpretivist, epistemology that does not test hypotheses or believe that researchers can control aspects of the worlds they are exploring. We elaborate the more common characteristics shared by qualitative researchers next.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Qualitative research (and its practice) typically embodies several common characteristics. In this section, we elaborate several, but we recognize that our list may not be exhaustive. Central to qualitative research is its *orientation toward the natural world*. Qualitative researchers gather data about sensory experience: what people (including researchers themselves) see, feel, hear, taste, and smell. As noted previously, qualitative research shares this focus on the empirical world with quantitative forms of inquiry. Qualitative research, however, stands in stark contrast to experimental laboratory conditions, probabilistic sampling strategies, and quasi-experimental designs that use control groups to compare intervention effects. Qualitative research developed in part as a critique of the artificial settings of the laboratory, searching for ways to systematically understand people's lived experiences. Doing research in the field, rather than in the laboratory or through a mailed questionnaire, became an important, complementary, and legitimate approach to social science.

Qualitative researchers go to the people; they do not extricate people from their everyday worlds. Qualitative researchers work in the field, face-to-face with real people. A second characteristic is that they try to understand people through multiple methods. These methods are interactive and humanistic. Qualitative researchers talk with people, watch and listen as folks go about their everyday tasks, read documents and records, and look at physical space, clothing, tools, and decorations. These are known more formally as the primary techniques of interviewing, observing, gathering documents, and examining material culture, which we will discuss in Chapter 7.

Moreover, qualitative researchers value the messiness of the lived world. They make a sustained focus on context integral to their work and assume that a detailed understanding of human experience is gained by exploring these complexities. Life occurs in context—that is, the natural setting in which the people work, study, play, eat, drink, love—in fact, *live*. Within these contexts, qualitative researchers are interested in individuals, groups, and interactions; they seek depth rather than breadth. A classroom context, for example, includes the students, the teacher, furniture and materials, and maybe the dust on the shelves. Classroom context also has external factors (e.g., the principal, the other classes, students and teachers, resources, and even the weather outside) that have an impact on what teachers and students do inside the room. As well, context is shaped by

What is epistemology?

- What is knowledge?
- How do we know what we know?
- What do we take as evidence?
- What convinces us that something is "true"?

Qualitative research . . .

- takes place in the natural world.
- uses multiple methods.
- focuses on context.
- is emergent rather than tightly prefigured.
- is fundamentally interpretive.

macro forces: federal policies, state regulations, community expectations, global climate change, and so on. Within these nested contexts, however, the individual or groups of individuals are central.

Again, this stance is distinct from experimental conditions in which the messiness of everyday life is controlled through processes of *randomization* (sampling subjects so that each person has an equal chance to be selected) and *standardization* (ensuring that experimental conditions are precisely the same). These processes blur individual uniqueness as they seek generalizations. Qualitative researchers' respect for the individual in context draws them to look at social worlds holistically, as interactive, complex systems rather than as discrete variables that can be measured and manipulated statistically. They describe and interpret rather than measure and predict.

Qualitative researchers try not to impose a rigid, a priori framework on the social world because they want to learn what constitutes important questions from the participants themselves. Qualitative researchers tend to avoid constructing formal hypotheses prior to the study, but they *do* bring a conceptual framework and guiding questions. This conceptual framework, however, can be—and most often is—changed, modified, and refined once the researcher is in the field as other, perhaps more intriguing, questions are discovered. In addition, the specific data-gathering actions can be altered, depending on what makes sense for the setting, the participants, and the researcher's growing knowledge about the project. Another characteristic, then, is the emergent nature of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive; that is, we offer explanations for objects or social actions. In contrast with quantitative approaches that attempt to control and predict, qualitative research focuses on description, analysis, and interpretation with the aim of making sense of the social world. This sense-making reflects a tension between the interpretations given to objects, interactions, and words by participants and the interpretations made by the researcher. The experience is analogous to the *hermeneutic circle* entered when reading (see, e.g., Gallagher, 1992; Rennie, 2012; Walsh, 2008); readers interpret author's presentations of situations through written texts. Similarly, qualitative researchers interactively connect participants, objects of study, and themselves.

The qualitative researcher recognizes that what she is observing, reading, or hearing has a particular meaning to the participants; at the same time, she assumes that understanding (analyzing and interpreting) and representing (interpreting and writing about) what she is learning are filtered through her own personal biography that is situated in a specific sociopolitical, historical moment (context). Through this personal lens, the researcher tries to make sense of what she has learned. She asks "What do I see (her understanding of what is happening)?" "How do participants see this (her understanding of how participants are interpreting what is happening)?" "What does it mean in a larger context?" Her conceptual framework suggests patterns and helps connect her interpretations to other instances. Field notes and snippets of interview transcriptions do not speak for themselves. They must be interpreted in ways that are thoughtful, ethical, and

politically astute. The resulting tale of the field (Van Maanen, 1988) is, ultimately, the researcher's story about the stories people have told her (Geertz, 1983).

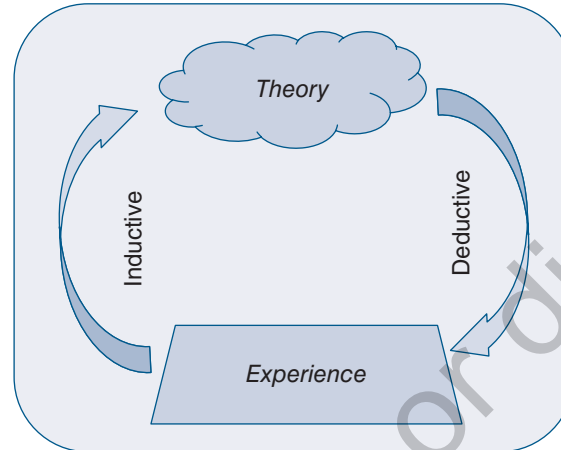
Historically, qualitative researchers tried to be as objective as possible in studying the lives of people, just like their quantitative counterparts. As the field evolved, however, it became clear that the researcher himself is critically important in conducting the study. Because the researcher enters the world of the participants, he may shape that world in significant ways. Another characteristic of qualitative research, then, is that researchers systematically reflect on how they affect the ongoing flow of everyday life and are affected by it.

However, researchers do more than affect ongoing social life: Their *weltanschauung* (worldview) shapes the entire project. From early curiosity all the way to writing the final report, your personal biography is the lens through which you see the world. Gender, race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, politics, and beliefs all affect any research project. Qualitative researchers recognize the importance of reflecting on who they are and how this shapes their research. Yet another characteristic, then, of qualitative research is an exquisite sensitivity to personal biography. Unlike the allegedly objective social scientist, the qualitative researcher values his unique perspective as a source of understanding rather than as something to be cleansed from the study. We'll see how personal experience and conceptual frameworks work in the process as our three characters develop their projects in this book. Marla, for example, draws on her experiences working with families and health. Anthony recollects working on urban poverty projects that received negative evaluations. Ruth is an avid athlete. These aspects of their biographies alert our characters to personal predispositions and frames of mind that they bring to their studies. This sensitivity is a simultaneous awareness of self and other and of the interplay between the two, captured by the term *reflexivity* (discussed further in Chapter 2).

Qualitative researchers rely on complex reasoning processes. These have traditionally been described as relying exclusively on principles of *inductive* logic—reasoning from the particular to more general statements to theory—rather than also incorporating *deductive* reasoning, which starts with theory and tests its applicability. Our stance is that this characterization of qualitative researchers as inductive rather than deductive oversimplifies and trivializes the complexity of any research, especially qualitative research. Qualitative researchers typically begin a study with a well-thought-out conceptual framework that focuses and shapes their decisions, but this framework is flexible. In fact, qualitative research recognizes that any individual enters a context with a personal perspective that shapes—and is shaped by—perceptions. Recall the discussion of the views of Aristotle and Plato. We argue that all inquiry proceeds through a complex, nonlinear process of induction, deduction, reflection, inspiration, and just plain old hard thinking. This can be conceptualized as *researcher praxis* (see Schön, 1983)—that is, the back-and-forth between theoretical ideas, data, and the researcher's reflection on both. A final feature of qualitative research, then, is a reliance on sophisticated reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative, moving back-and-forth between the parts and the whole (Figure 1.2).

The qualitative researcher . . .

- views the social world holistically.
- systematically reflects on who she is.
- is sensitive to personal biography.
- uses complex reasoning.
- conducts systematic inquiry.

FIGURE 1.2 Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

Systematic inquiry entails . . .

- being able to explain the basis for each decision in the conduct of a study.
- documenting those decisions so that others can review, comment on, and critique them.

Finally, we claim that good qualitative research is *systematic research* at the same time that it is interpretive, holistic, contextual, and messy. It is systematic because a qualitative researcher follows a deliberate, conscious process of making decisions and explicating those decisions so that others may understand how the study was done, assess its adequacy and trustworthiness, and critique it. Systematic inquiry produces new information. When this information is used to improve the human condition, it becomes knowledge.

To recap, qualitative research is a complex field of inquiry that draws on many diverse assumptions but embraces a few common characteristics and perspectives. A qualitative research project takes place in the field; relies on multiple methods for gathering data; and calls on you to be pragmatic, flexible, politically aware, ethical, and self-reflective. Fundamentally interpretive and emergent, qualitative research is systematic inquiry that is characterized by a stance of openness, curiosity, and respect. On the practical side, qualitative research is labor-intensive, time-consuming, frustrating, and challenging. There are no formulaic rules to follow, only guiding principles gleaned from direct experience, including reading the literature, studying with others, and the actual doing. Moreover, many find it exhilarating and deeply moving, and it can change your worldview.

TYPICAL PURPOSES AND OVERALL APPROACHES

We began this chapter by asserting that qualitative research starts with questions and results in learning. The learning that ultimately occurs, however, is shaped by the questions posed early on and then modified during the research, as appropriate. The guiding questions, in turn, shape the specific research activities. Both elements (research questions and specific research activities) are guided by the researcher's overall purpose in

conducting the study. We suggest you ask yourself the following important questions in the early stages of thinking through a research effort:

- What do you hope to accomplish?
- What are your primary goals of the study?
- How will this study contribute to improving the human condition?

Although researchers approach their studies with many and varied purposes, our experience suggests that these can be usefully synthesized into three broad ones:

- Describing
- Comparing and contrasting
- Forecasting

All three purposes can lead to theory building or refinement, improvements in practice, and policy change.

For the first purpose, we claim that there is no such thing as pure description; the very act of describing requires analysis and interpretation. To achieve this purpose, you might want to describe an interesting social initiative in and of itself. This could be a public health clinic in a village in Kenya that serves AIDS-affected children. The researcher's purpose is to describe analytically, fully, and completely, this clinic: its elements, processes, and people. If various initiatives serving AIDS-affected children have already been richly described (by this researcher or others), the researcher might want to compare and contrast two examples in order to understand the differences in juxtaposition. The comparison might involve evaluation or judgment about effectiveness. The researcher might compare an intensive summer program with the activities available at the clinic. Comparing and contrasting these initiatives would clarify features of both, leading to a more informed judgment of merit and worth (Rallis & Rossman, 2001, 2002). Finally, our researcher might want to conduct a small-scale experiment in which he integrated features of the clinic and the summer camp program into a new school-based initiative to raise HIV/AIDS awareness and to serve those affected. His purpose in conducting this experiment would be to learn what works well in order to forecast, or predict, what could be successfully implemented more widely.

Analytic description, comparison, and forecasting are complex, interrelated cognitive activities that are seldom performed singularly or in a linear process. All three activities are related and may be used iteratively. Fundamental is the notion of describing the phenomenon of interest as fully as possible; this stands as the grounding for subsequent comparing or forecasting. Through a similar logic, making comparisons across examples of a program yields rich descriptions and deep understanding that inform judgments. And forecasting under what circumstances a specific program may work well and where it may struggle extends the range of insights into programmatic descriptions.

Analytic descriptive studies . . .

- describe and analyze social phenomena and contribute to understanding about them.

Evaluations or policy studies . . .

- compare with a standard to determine merit and worth and thus inform decision making.

Action research . . .

- takes reasoned action to improve programs or practices and thus to learn and then forecast what works well and what does not.

The accepted wisdom in the research enterprise is that researchers, especially beginners, should not choose methods for data collection and analysis according to a quantitative or qualitative distinction but rather according to what they want to learn and the questions that will lead them toward that learning. Although this wisdom has merit, we have noted that researchers' training and psychological predilections incline them toward particular sorts of questions that demand particular sorts of research methods (see Creswell, 2009). When the most appropriate methods to achieve the purpose of describing, comparing and contrasting, or forecasting require words, sounds, images, and the judicious use of numbers rather than measurements or correlations, and when the phenomenon or case is best observed in its natural context, you should use qualitative methods. Thus, qualitative researchers commonly conduct analytic, descriptive studies of groups or individuals. Their comparative studies often take the form of evaluations or policy studies. Their small-scale experiments are likely to be action research. Our use of the term *action research* is inclusive rather than specialized, stipulating that participatory research, which is explicitly ideological, be included along with other forms of action research.

We argue that these three broad purposes or goals for research map fairly neatly onto three overall approaches: (1) analytic descriptive studies, (2) evaluation or policy studies, and (3) action research. Each overall approach has an embedded purpose: to describe, to compare and contrast to a standard or to past or other similar instances, or to describe and forecast. Within each approach, you may choose to implement the study with a variety of data collection methods that will further the goal for the research. Moreover, as described below, a qualitative research study may draw on more than one approach.

THE CHARACTERS' CHOICES

Our characters offer concrete variations of the three purposes and overall approaches discussed above: Ruth chooses to focus on analytic description for her study. Anthony evaluates a program, using both description and comparison. And Marla's collaborative action research study describes, explores relationships between phenomena, and forecasts potential actions. The questions they pursue are shaped, to a considerable extent, by the overall purpose of their studies.

Descriptive Studies

Ruth wants to understand how to better the lives of children with disabilities. For her, understanding comes through describing their lives, so she chooses to conduct a descriptive study. She soon discovers, however, that description is seldom neutral. Eventually, she develops rich interpretive narratives depicting the children's activities and feelings, as well as those of the people with whom they interact. She explores their struggles, triumphs, courage, and ordinariness. The result is a compelling story about the world she has explored. Descriptive studies depict complex social processes and understandings through detailed analytic description. Their purpose is typically enlightenment, seeking to display deep insights.

Evaluation or Policy Studies

Seeking to inform and influence decision making or planning, **Anthony** chooses an evaluation study. He is hired as a consultant to evaluate the activities of a community arts program. The funding agency wants to know if the program is accomplishing its goals of creating experiences of the arts for a wider, more diverse community audience. To do this, Anthony needs to learn both about the program itself and about the standards for such programs. He might have to read about other community art programs to learn what is possible.

Evaluation research provides formative or summative information that describes and assesses the effectiveness of a program. Formative information is used to improve the program; summative information contributes to a final decision about its value and effectiveness in producing intended changes. Policy studies provide information that helps governmental, institutional, or organizational authorities make policy decisions and develop programs to implement those policies. As in Anthony's case, evaluators or policy researchers are usually contracted by an organization or agency to conduct the study and prepare a report.

Action Research

Marla's questions, which emphasize stakeholder participation and change in practice, lead her to action research. She facilitates a group of women from the clinic's catchment area to identify and describe current problematic conditions; their learning will lead them to advocate for changes in practice. Action research is "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within" (Elliot & Keynes, 1991, p. 69). The process involves analysis, reflection, taking action, assessing the effect of those actions, further reflection leading to new action, and so on—in a cyclical manner. Practitioners may study their own practices to improve them. Groups may undertake projects to understand better and improve their environments. In the former, an individual may work alone; in the latter, collective, collaborative, and self-reflective inquiry is undertaken by a group. Their purpose is to promote social change by transforming structures through the influence of the information collected. Marla and the women's group in her project aim to use their results to try to bring changes in access to health care for women living in poor urban settings.

We elaborate their approaches throughout the book as Ruth, Anthony, and Marla design and conduct their studies.

WAYS OF USING RESEARCH

Anthony, Ruth, and Marla embark on qualitative studies because they want to learn something about the social world through close interaction with others. Marla begins with a hunch she wants to explore: She suspects that the health care system does not adequately

address women's issues. More specifically, she is puzzled about something she has seen: She noticed that women who visited a clinic where she worked came for initial visits but then seldom returned for follow-up. What might account for this? How could this pattern be changed?

Ruth, in contrast, is simply curious about children with various types of disabilities. She asks, What are their lives like? How do they navigate through a world designed for able-bodied people? How do they feel—included or left out? On the other hand, Anthony wants to know how decision makers use information. He is particularly interested in how they use evaluations to make funding decisions. Each of our characters begins with a question, a curiosity, and an intriguing puzzle. Use is built into the questions both Marla and Anthony ask. Ruth soon recognizes the potential for her descriptions of children to be extraordinarily useful for many audiences.

The ultimate goal of qualitative research is learning—that is, the transformation of data into information that can be used. We argue that use can be considered an ethical mandate, that any study should be designed with potential uses in mind. Usefulness, however, is not a simple unitary concept. We suggest four perspectives for thinking about use: instrumental, enlightenment, symbolic, and transformative. These perspectives serve as lenses to understand how the results of a particular study may be used. Different audiences might use the same written report in different ways—for example, one instrumentally and the other symbolically. You cannot dictate or control the uses that various audiences may make of your study, as Ruth notes in the beginning vignette. You do, however, need to be aware that the study *will* be used, one way or another, and sometimes those uses are different from the ones you intend.

Instrumental Use

People commonly think of use as instrumental—that is, “when a decision or action follows, at least in part [from the research]” (Patton, 2002, p. 332). Specific information is applied to a particular problem. A problem exists or a goal is sought; research is conducted to determine a good solution or approach to reach the goal. For example, a private school hires a research firm to discover why enrollment has dropped, a service agency surveys its community to identify unmet needs, or an international nongovernmental organization wants to know if funds spent to build new schools in Sierra Leone result in higher school attendance rates. The findings of research, then, are developed into knowledge—that is, with plans to implement in practice. Knowledge generation and knowledge utilization are directly linked.

This perspective on use is linear and assumes a rational decision-making process in which decision makers have clear goals, seek direct attainment of these goals, and have access to relevant research knowledge. As Patton (1997) notes, instrumental use usually requires planning for use before the data are even collected. The researcher works with the intended users to develop relevant questions from which data collection and analysis flow. Evaluation and policy studies, practitioner inquiry, and action research

Instrumental use:

- knowledge is applied to specific problems.
- knowledge provides solutions or recommendations.

are apt for instrumental use if the researcher and the user work together to produce technical knowledge. For these reasons, Marla's and Anthony's studies are likely to be used instrumentally.

Enlightenment Use

In our experience, the links between knowledge generation and utilization are seldom clear and direct. Research findings often serve to enlighten the user (Weiss, 1998). Knowledge accumulates, contributing to a gradual reorientation of the user's thought and action. Specific information cannot be identified as the basis for a particular decision or action. Moreover, one piece of information may contribute to several decisions. We imagine this model of use as a pool of accumulated knowledge into which the user may dip when making a decision.

From the enlightenment perspective, users base their decisions on knowledge, but the specific information is not important. In her classic work on use, Weiss (1980) describes knowledge as providing a background of working understandings and ideas that "creep" (p. 381) into decision deliberations. Policy actions are not decided in a clear-cut, brisk style with obvious connections among problems, people, and alternative choices. Instead, policy "accretes" (p. 382). Research findings become part of the general culture, incorporated into accepted concepts, beliefs, and values that naturally influence any decision making in that arena.

Detailed findings become generalizations that eventually are accepted as truths and come to shape the ways in which people think. In a classic example, Rein (1970) cites a series of controversial and threatening reports about conditions in a mental hospital. The reports were not used by the hospital staff, perhaps because the staff themselves were criticized. The research findings were initially not compatible with the decision makers' values or goals. The information was, however, picked up by health care advocates to challenge existing beliefs. The result was a gradual change in the operation of mental institutions in general. Rein's point is that, although the information was not used in a directly instrumental sense, it did shape the policy decision arena. The findings worked their way into public consciousness, eventually overturning established values and patterns of thought. Following this logic, Ruth's descriptive study of children with disabilities could serve to enlighten education officials. Similarly, accumulated knowledge can serve to improve practice by enhancing understanding of that practice. If Anthony is able to identify and label particularly effective elements in the program he evaluates, that knowledge is likely to contribute to program improvement.

Symbolic Use

Research findings may also support a variety of symbolic uses (Bolman & Deal, 2013) by reinforcing values and beliefs or by encouraging users to reconfigure old patterns and to see familiar pictures in new lights. Because explanation and understanding are

Enlightenment use . . .

- contributes to general knowledge.
- enhances understanding.
- offers heuristic insight.

important human needs (Maslowe, 1970), we tend to look for patterns and create narratives to make sense of our worlds. Qualitative research can build explanations, making complex, ambiguous experiences and beliefs comprehensible and communicable to others. Creating and disseminating detailed analytic descriptions can evoke deep cultural values and serve to legitimize events or actions within that culture. For example, the conduct and completion of Ruth's study can, in and of itself, serve to foster public acceptance of children with disabilities. Research results also may serve to surface deeply disturbing actions that a culture publicly masks. As well as Rein's research on mental institutions, Tracey Kidder's *Old Friends* (1993) provides an example. His rich descriptions of residents of a nursing home are evocative of aging in America. Similarly, *A Beautiful Mind* (Nasar, 1998) reveals the mysteries of schizophrenia, building the public's understanding and perhaps acceptance.

Furthermore, because qualitative research directly involves the participants, the process in and of itself generates stories. People talk, often underground, about the study and the routines involved in its conduct (see, e.g., Van Maanen's *Tales of the Field*, 1988). This "talk" becomes part of cultural knowledge that offers new and often satisfying interpretations of familiar events. These interpretations become myths—stories that offer explanations and reveal shared understandings. We experienced this effect during a long-term study of cardiopulmonary resuscitation training; we heard stories about our preliminary findings. Participants turned our preliminary findings into stories they retold time and again as explanations for the way things were done in the training and as support for the training's continuance.

As researchers, however, we feel obligated to ensure that the symbolic use does not preclude other uses. Once we evaluated a school restructuring initiative. The goals and objectives of the program were admirable, but little or nothing was happening to implement them. Program staff were talking but not acting. Our formative evaluation reports revealed the problem, but the program manager simply thanked us, checked whether those that required evaluation had been completed, and filed them away. Because we felt that the program had the potential to make a difference for children (and consumed a substantial number of federal dollars), we wanted more than superficial symbolic use in this case. We took steps to end the study. Fortunately, a new manager was coincidentally appointed, and she established with us a strong and productive relationship that facilitated the use of our evaluation information.

Transformative Use

Research also has the potential to change lives. The researchers (and often the participants, as well) hope that the process of inquiry, action, and reflection—and the knowledge it generates—will be transformative, altering some aspect of society. The process and results can become a source of empowerment for participants' immediate daily lives and may affect larger oppressive social relations. The participants are not generating knowledge simply to inform or enlighten an academic community. They are

Symbolic use . . .

- provides new ways of expressing phenomena.
- crystallizes beliefs or values.
- reconceptualizes public perceptions.

collaboratively producing knowledge to improve their work and their lives. Participants do the research about their own settings, and the person in the official researcher role facilitates. Transformative use grows out of Paolo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the belief that the reflection and action implicit in knowledge can free practice. Freire viewed research as a form of social action. His research in the 1960s and 1970s on Chilean literacy involved members of oppressed communities in identifying issues of vital importance. These collaborative discoveries became a foundation for literacy instruction and for community empowerment. The two purposes of the research were to help participants acquire literacy and to help them improve their lives.

Today, participatory action research and feminist studies offer examples of hoped-for transformative uses. The women who collaborate with Marla in her study become savvy in regularly using clinic services. At the same time, they realize that they avoided the clinic because of sustained and pervasive patterns of subtle discrimination against them due to language, gender, and income levels. Their discoveries encourage them to try to change these patterns for other women. In this light, the research of Marla and her collaborators may well be transformative.

In summary, researchers' questions lead them to collect data. They arrange these data into meaningful patterns. The information becomes knowledge through its instrumental, enlightenment, symbolic, or transformative application—or all of these. The qualitative researcher, then, is in the business of generating knowledge that can serve the society studied, whether through immediate impact on a decision, through shaping people's understandings of a complex topic, through interpreting and reinterpreting the meaning of events, or through actions that can empower the participants.

DISPOSITIONS AND SKILLS

Marla, Ruth, and Anthony are setting out to generate knowledge by learning in the field. They will design studies; collect, analyze, and interpret their data; and present their findings. The process is an active one, and it is not simple. They will face one decision after another for which few prescribed rules exist. Their tasks are not tightly specified, and they have few explicit steps to follow because knowledge creation is not straightforward and linear. *They learn by doing.*

By definition, knowledge is iterative; it builds on itself. Therefore, the research process is *heuristic*—a discovering experience. Heuristic inquiry, from the Greek for “discover,” implies personal insight and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1962). Tacit knowing is deep inner understanding. It is unarticulated knowledge that derives from experience. Out of this knowing come the hunches that drive the questions we articulate. Qualitative research recognizes the heuristic aspect of knowledge creation and works with deeply subjectivist assumptions, as discussed in Chapter 2.

As they learn in the field, Marla, Ruth, and Anthony must be exquisitely conscious of the contexts surrounding their studies. They will come to respect that each interprets

Transformative use . . .

- occurs when participants take actions that empower them to change oppressive structures and practices.

his or her data from a particular perspective, standpoint, and situation. They will learn that each researcher can report only his own discoveries or represent what he believes to be the perspectives of the people he studied. They will not attempt to be “objective” by seeking the one “true” answer. Their processes, then, are *hermeneutic* (or interpretive), leading each to choose from among possible answers.

Ultimately, they will stop asking for a rulebook and learn to trust the process. They will seek meaning in the rich descriptions they create from what they see, hear, and read. They will learn to suspend disbelief and to cope with ambiguity. Their initial questions shape early data collection; this reshapes the questions that, in turn, call for further data. Their decisions cascade, and data form patterns of information that can become knowledge. *They learn by doing.*

Marla, Anthony, and Ruth start with curiosity; the first step in qualitative research is to want to discover something. They will need to be perceptive and to develop competence in certain basic skills: interviewing, observing, analyzing, interpreting, and preparing an engaging presentation of what they have learned. They face, however, a conundrum. They need to know everything about qualitative research to do it, but they can best learn how to do it by doing it! This conundrum was expressed by Anthony in the vignette at the beginning of this chapter. What will help them through this conundrum are certain dispositions in addition to specific skills. The skills are what they learn by doing; the dispositions create the propensity to learn and enact the skills. These dispositions include the following:

- Comfort with ambiguity
- Capacity to make reasoned decisions and to articulate the logic behind those decisions
- Deep interpersonal or emotional sensitivity
- Ethical sensitivity of potential consequences to individuals and groups
- Political sensitivity
- Perseverance and self-discipline

As our characters work in the field, these dispositions and skills become part of their research praxis—intuitive and reasoned actions that make them proficient and ethical qualitative researchers.

In this chapter, we have described qualitative research as an emergent, interpretive, holistic, reflexive, and iterative process that uses interactive and humanistic methods. It is conducted in the real world. Qualitative researchers are learners who are systematic and rigorous while sensitive to the ways in which their own identities and life histories shape their projects. As learners, they generate knowledge that various audiences use instrumentally, to enlighten, symbolically, to transform, or all of these. Qualitative researchers use

strategies such as descriptive studies, evaluation and policy studies, and action research. Fundamentally, they develop the dispositions and skills to live and work in this ambiguous and uncertain world.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The purpose of this book is to introduce you to qualitative research. In this chapter, you have read about the characteristics, use, strategies and overall approaches, and dispositions and skills of good practice.

In Chapter 2, our focus falls on the person doing the research. As a learner, you—the researcher—make assumptions about what you know and what you accept as truth. You will learn about becoming reflexive. This chapter presents you as a constructor of knowledge and explores the worldviews within which researchers operate. Chapter 3 discusses broad standards for judging the credibility, rigor, and worth of qualitative research as well as for ensuring ethical practice. These elements of the trustworthiness of a study are not divorced from the assumptions that undergird your study. This chapter includes a discussion of human subject review and institutional reviews boards.

Chapter 4 presents the different genres of research that shape various methodological strategies. We describe how choices for designs and methods draw from three broad qualitative research traditions and discuss a few others. Chapter 5 examines how an initial curiosity or intriguing problem of practice turns into a conceptual framework for a study. We show how you develop this framework from your ideas and then how you design a study.

Chapters 6 through 10 take you through the process of implementing a study, dealing with entry, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Texts on qualitative research usually separate data collection into chapters on the two primary techniques: observation and interviewing. Because we find that separation artificial, and because researchers also use other techniques, we create different distinctions. Chapter 6 discusses access and introduction to the research site or participants. Chapter 7 demonstrates how data are collected through looking, asking, listening, and reading. To illustrate the products of data gathering, Chapter 8 offers sets of data collected by our characters with our critical commentary. Chapter 9 discusses several questions that often arise during fieldwork. Chapter 10 then explicates the principles of data analysis and interpretation. In concert with Chapter 8, Chapter 11 presents examples of our characters' analyses.

Finally, if the research is to be used by anyone other than you, the information must be presented so that appropriate audiences can access and understand it. Chapter 12 discusses how you connect with audiences through various ways of reporting the information. At the end of most chapters, we provide learning activities that you may want to use with your community of practice, and we also provide additional suggestions for further reading.

ACTIVITIES FOR YOUR COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Study Questions

- What are the distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research?
- In what ways can research findings be used?
- What are the essential strategies of qualitative research?
- How does qualitative research rely on inductive and deductive reasoning processes?
- What topics might you want to study?

Small-Group or Dyad Activities

What Does a Qualitative Researcher Do?

Take 5 to 7 minutes to write down what you imagine yourself doing when you do qualitative research. Introduce yourself to your immediate neighbor and share your thoughts. Report to the whole group.

Describe an Everyday Artifact

We each live in a world that is familiar to us yet may not be familiar to others who enter it. Using a living space that is important to you (e.g., your own room, apartment, or office), choose an everyday object that is a part of your life. Write a detailed description about this object but do not name it. Take 10 minutes. Share this in dyads, comparing and contrasting the focus of the description (e.g., color, texture, function, composition), level of detail, and choice of objects.

Role-Play on Use

Read carefully one of your assigned supplemental readings. Divide into four groups, each representing one of the four uses of research: (1) instrumental, (2) enlightenment, (3) symbolic, and (4) emancipatory. Each group's task is to plan a strategy for the assigned use. For example, how could the study be used instrumentally by policymakers? How could it be used symbolically in a marketing campaign? How could it enlighten consumers? How could it serve to emancipate workers? Discuss and create a role play demonstrating this use (spend about 20 minutes). Present it to the rest of the class.

FURTHER READINGS

Qualitative Research

- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2014). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Flick, U. (2014). *An introduction to qualitative research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Given, L. M. (2016). *100 questions (and answers) about qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *Thinking qualitatively: Methods of mind*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & Devault, M. (2015). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Use

- Eisner, E. W., & Peshkin, A. (Eds.). (1990). *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press. (See Part IV, "Uses of Qualitative Inquiry," pp. 301–364.)
- Jenkins, M. J. (2014). The use of qualitative methods and practitioners-as-authors in journal publications of police research. *Police Practice & Research*, 16(6), 499–511.
- Kline, R. B. (2008). *Becoming a behavioral science researcher: A guide to producing research that matters*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lindblom, C. (1990). *Inquiry and change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lindblom, C. E., & Cohen, D. K. (1979). *Usable knowledge*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2010). *Developmental evaluation: Applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Patton, M. Q. (2012). *Essentials of utilization-focused evaluation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Weisner, T. S. (2014). Why qualitative and ethnographic methods are essential for understanding family life. In S. M. McHale, P. Amato, & A. Booth (Eds.), *Emerging methods in family research* (pp. 163–178). New York, NY: Springer International.

Analytic Descriptive Studies

- Atkinson, P. A., & Delamont, S. (Eds.). (2008). *Representing ethnography: Reading, writing and rhetoric in qualitative research*. London, England: Sage.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2006). *Qualitative research in education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Crang, M., & Cook, I. (2007). *Doing ethnographies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. C. Whittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 119–161). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Madden, R. (2012). *Being ethnographic: A guide to the theory and practice of ethnography* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Madison, D. S. (2011). *Critical ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Van Maanen, J. (2011). *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ybema, S., Yanow, D., Wels, H., & Kamsteeg, F. (2009). *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexity of everyday life*. London, England: Sage.

Evaluation and Policy Studies

- Chelimsky, E., & Shaddish, W. R. (Eds.). (1997). *Evaluation for the 21st century: A handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Goodyear, L., Barela, E., Jewiss, J., & Usinger, J. (2014). *Qualitative inquiry in evaluation: From theory to practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Greene, J. C. (2000). Understanding social programs through evaluation. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 981–999). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stone, D. (2011). *Policy paradox: The art of political decision making* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Weiss, C. H. (1998). *Evaluation: Methods for studying programs and policies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Action Research and Participatory Action Research

- Greenwood, D. J., & Levin, M. (2007). *Introduction to action research: Social research for social change* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2005). Participatory action research: Communicative action in the public sphere. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 567–605). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (1991). *Teachers as researchers: Qualitative inquiry as a path to empowerment*. New York, NY: Falmer Press.
- McIntyre, A. (2008). *Participatory action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and writing action research*. London, England: Sage.
- Reason, P. W., & Bradbury-Huang, H. (2013). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stringer, E. T. (2013). *Action research: A handbook for practitioners* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Van der Riet, M. (2008). Participatory research and the philosophy of social science: Beyond the moral imperative. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14(4), 546–565.