

5 Achieving Alignment Throughout Your Dissertation

Chapter 5 Objectives

- Offer a comprehensive overview of the concept of alignment in qualitative research.
- Highlight and clarify the key elements and concepts that must be aligned throughout the dissertation.
- Explain how to ensure and check for alignment throughout a qualitative dissertation in order to best conduct and write up the research.
- Provide guidelines and suggestions regarding establishing and maintaining congruence, and therefore methodological integrity, throughout the qualitative dissertation process.

Overview

Your dissertation is a multifaceted product that should, in the end, demonstrate that you were capable of conceptualizing, managing, conducting, and presenting a rigorous and comprehensive qualitative research study. Of importance, your final product should also indicate and provide clear evidence that you have addressed alignment at every step of the process, and that all of the key pieces of the larger “whole” are congruent and fit with each other. Qualitative research is recursive in that it builds on and depends upon all of its component parts. Making sure that you have achieved alignment among all the key components and elements means that your study is tight in terms of methodological integrity. Methodological integrity is essential both at a philosophical and a practical level and is an indication of a study of worth and quality.

There are numerous key elements and concepts that must be aligned and remain consistent throughout the dissertation so that the study remains methodologically sound. This process begins when the researcher identifies a worthy topic, goes on to formulate the research problem and purpose of the study, and then develops a set of appropriate research questions to address the study’s purpose. Because the research questions are directly tied to the research purpose, answering the questions must, in the final analysis, accomplish the study’s purpose and also contribute to shedding light on and addressing the research problem. The problem, purpose, and research questions constitute the essential thrust of a qualitative study, and clear and evident alignment among these three core elements enhances the logic, coherence, consistency, and transparency of the research overall. It should be clear from reading Chapter 3 that each research methodology within the broader field of qualitative research (also referred to as *traditions* or *genres*) is founded on a particular philosophy that influences the type of research design and methods used. Therefore, one of the core issues related to planning and conducting a methodologically sound

qualitative study is how to choose an appropriate and suitable methodology that will address your research problem. Having made this choice, you will thus proceed to design your study within the framework of the methodology that you have selected. All of the components of the design process, including the theoretical or conceptual framework, methods of data collection, data analysis, and data presentation, will need to be aligned with and reflect the principles and features that characterize your chosen methodology so that there is a conceptual fit across all levels. In essence, the theoretical or conceptual framework, research design, and research methodology together must generate data appropriate and adequate for responding to the study's research questions. Finally, once you have conducted the study, your conclusions should tie together the study's major findings. Your recommendations, which follow your findings and conclusions, are, in turn, the application of those conclusions to practice, policy, and future research.

This chapter seeks to provide you with a clear understanding of the concept of alignment in qualitative research, highlights and clarifies the key elements that must be aligned throughout the dissertation, and explains how to ensure and check for alignment throughout the research process. Alignment (or lack of alignment) is often a key question or issue at the time of the dissertation defense. The final dissertation manuscript should provide clear evidence that you have addressed alignment at every step of the process so that the study reflects methodological integrity. Table 5.1 serves as an at-a-glance road map, indicating the key components and elements

TABLE 5.1 **Aligning Key Dissertation Components**

	Areas for Alignment	Chapter Reference
1	Research Problem and Research Approach (Qualitative Research)	3, 4, 6
2	Research Problem and Research Purpose	4, 6
3	Research Problem, Research Purpose, and Research Questions	4, 6
4	Research Problem, Research Purpose, and Research Methodology (qualitative genre or tradition) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Case Study B. Ethnography C. Phenomenology D. Grounded Theory E. Narrative Inquiry F. Action Research G. The Critical Genres 	3, 4, 6, 8
5	Research Methodology and Research Methods	3, 8

(Continued)

TABLE 5.1 (Continued)

	Areas for Alignment	Chapter Reference
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Case Study B. Ethnography C. Phenomenology D. Grounded Theory E. Narrative Inquiry F. Action Research G. The Critical Genres 	
6	Research Problem and Literature Review	4, 6, 7
7	Literature Review and Theoretical/Conceptual Framework	7
8	Theoretical/Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, and Research Findings	4, 6, 7, 9, 10
9	Research Methodology, Research Design, and Data Analysis <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Case Study B. Ethnography C. Phenomenology D. Grounded Theory E. Narrative Inquiry F. Action Research G. The Critical Genres 	3, 8, 9
10	Research Methodology, Research Design, and Presentation of Findings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A. Case Study B. Ethnography C. Phenomenology D. Grounded Theory E. Narrative Inquiry F. Action Research G. The Critical Genres 	3, 8, 10
11	Research Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions	10, 11
12	Conclusions and Recommendations	10, 11

that should be taken into account vis-à-vis alignment, and for ease of use, the table includes reference to relevant chapters in this book. Checking for and achieving alignment is something you should be aware of at the very start of your study, throughout the research and writing process, and again at the completion stage, where you will revisit the importance of alignment again to make sure that all the elements that constitute your entire document are aligned and that there are no holes, gaps, or inconsistencies. The intent is that by reading this chapter, you will come away with a clearer understanding of the concepts of alignment, congruence, and methodological integrity vis-à-vis qualitative research.

Research Problem and Research Approach

The starting point for any research study, and indeed the first major challenge in conducting research, involves identifying and developing a sound topic. Once you have identified a general area of interest, you will need to begin narrowing your topic. The process of developing a researchable topic is a process of idea generation—the movement from a general interest toward a more clearly refined idea around a researchable problem.

The goals of theoretical research are either to contribute new knowledge or extend current theory to a new area. The goals of applied research are to use knowledge to contribute directly to the understanding of a problem or generate a solution for the problem. You should be asking:

- Is my worldview aligned with a qualitative research approach?
- Does my intended research problem “fit” with qualitative research?
- Do the problem, purpose of the study, and the research questions have the potential to serve the goal of the research, either applied or theoretical?
- Is there sufficient theory to explain the phenomenon, or a reasonable solution to the research problem, sometimes referred to as the “so what?” test?

As a field, qualitative research is broad and deep. While subtly nuanced in many ways, the overall field itself is defined by key characteristics. To begin, you will need to become knowledgeable about the characteristics of qualitative research, including the strengths, challenges, and limitations associated with this approach to inquiry.

Quantitative research is applied to describe current conditions, investigate relationships, and study cause-effect phenomena. Qualitative research, in contrast, is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. This implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description. Both research approaches involve complex processes in which particular data collection and data analysis methods assume meaning and significance in relation to the assumptions underlying the larger intellectual traditions within which these methods are applied. However, rather than determine cause and effect, or predict or describe the distribution of an attribute among a population, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences and how they construct their worlds. The two paradigms or orientations that inform qualitative research, namely social constructivism (or interpretivism) and critical theory, both place emphasis on seeking understanding of the meanings of human actions and experiences and on generating accounts of meaning from the viewpoints of those involved. Both paradigms assume that reality is socially constructed and that there is no single observable reality, but rather multiple realities or interpretations. Qualitative researchers study individuals and groups in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning

that people bring to them. The intent of qualitative research essentially is to examine a social situation or interaction by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others and to achieve a *holistic* understanding rooted in real-world complexity and to describe, explain, and communicate that understanding.

Since description, understanding, interpretation, and communication are the primary goals of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Whereas in quantitative research the role of the researcher is to remain detached, with the aim of being as objective as possible, in qualitative research the *researcher as instrument* openly brings her or his experience and perspective to the research. Qualitative research does not purport to be objective, nor is this a goal. However, to be rigorous, qualitative research does strive to be transparent and to openly, legitimately, and clearly document and communicate all decisions taken throughout the research process. Qualitative research seeks to establish credibility, dependability, and confirmability and is concerned with the issue of transferability rather than generalizability (as in the case of quantitative research)—that is, how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts.

Research Problem and Research Purpose

Your study's research problem and research purpose contain similar information but are presented in different ways. The problem includes some background and context for the issue that is in need of exploration and also provides a rationale for the importance of the topic. The research purpose is an extension of the research problem. The problem statement serves a foundational role in that it communicates what is the formal reason for engaging in the dissertation in the first place. The problem statement is the discrepancy between what we already know and what we want to know. The statement also illustrates why we care—that is, the reasons why your study should be conducted.

Once you have identified your own narrowly defined topic and concise problem statement, you are ready to formulate your purpose statement. The purpose statement is the *major objective or intent of the study* and enables the reader to understand the central thrust of your research. In essence, your research purpose will shed light on or serve to deepen understanding of your research problem.

Note that choice of a qualitative approach is directly tied to research problem and purpose. As the researcher, you actively create the link among problem, purpose, and approach through a process of reflecting on your problem and purpose, focusing on researchable questions, and considering how to best address these questions. Thinking along these lines affords a research study methodological congruence (Richards & Morse, 2013). It is important to understand that a research problem should not be modified to fit a particular research approach. You cannot assume a qualitative approach regardless of your research problem. In other words, research approach follows research problem; the appropriate research approach is the one that best fits with your research problem.

Research Problem, Research Purpose, and Research Questions

These are the three core elements that form the very backbone of your study. As stated previously, the research problem and purpose contain similar information but are presented differently. The

problem statement provides background and context to situate the research problem, and also provides a rationale for the importance of the study. The research purpose is an extension of the research problem and also provides a framework for the research questions. The research questions in turn mirror the research purpose; that is, if you look closely, the questions are actually the research purpose in narrative form, and they should shed light on the purpose.

Because the research questions are directly tied to the research purpose, answering the questions must accomplish the study's purpose and also, in the final analysis, contribute to shedding light on and addressing the problem. One must in effect be able to trace all the ideas in the research questions back through the purpose statement to the problem statement; this underscores, therefore, that you must ask relevant and effective questions. The research questions, which can be answered by qualitative and quantitative data, will necessarily correspond directly to the research methodology (qualitative genre or tradition).

Qualitative research is *recursive* in that it builds and depends upon all of its component parts. Qualitative research is also flexible, and that is certainly one of its hallmarks. Your research questions are often informed by your personal and/or professional experiences, literature you have read, and the way that you understand the world. Furthermore, as you begin to implement your research, the preliminary data you collect will also inform (and possibly lead you to refine) your research questions. That said, achieving alignment between your research purpose and research questions is key. You will not want any new questions that you may develop to be misaligned with your purpose, and hence with your research problem.

Remember that the first chapter of your dissertation (which you begin developing in the proposal stage) is the most critical, and everything that follows hinges on how well this chapter is constructed. This first chapter of the dissertation is also critical in that it forms part of the research proposal. The introductory chapter therefore sets the stage for the study; it also makes a case for the significance of the problem, contextualizes the study, and provides an introduction to its basic components—most specifically, directing the reader to the research problem, research purpose, and research questions.

Research Problem, Research Purpose, and Research Methodology (Qualitative Genre or Tradition)

One of the core issues related to planning and conducting a qualitative study is how to choose an appropriate and suitable research methodology, also referred to as qualitative genre or tradition. What is the best place to start? Should your decision be based on the research design and philosophical paradigm of your project? What if you don't know quite yet what is the philosophy of your research? Should you choose a methodology that is most familiar to you or that you have heard other students using? Should you choose a methodology that will be the easiest to apply? How will you justify your choice? Defining the purpose of your research will help bring you clarity.

Qualitative inquiry includes a variety of research methodologies, each of which is based on particular views about the social world and how it is known (ontology) and views about knowledge and how it is knowable (epistemology). Each worldview carries with it certain values and perspectives, including how the quality of research is to be evaluated. Philosophy and method, rather similar to form and function, create an integrated whole. When research is approached without clarity of underlying philosophical constructs, execution will be haphazard, often leading to inaccurate and meaningless findings. The worldview of a researcher determines the type

of research problem and research purpose that are selected, as well as methodological approach, specific methods of data collection, specific data analysis procedures, interpretation of data, and presentation of findings. Worldview or paradigm in essence, therefore, determines the study's overall research design—that is, the way you as the researcher plan for, articulate, and set up the *doing* of your study. Worldview therefore influences all phases of the research project and the many choices within each phase, forming the study's philosophical substructure. As such, qualitative research is a truly holistic activity whereby the various layers of research align with one another. Qualitative researchers should therefore approach their research through a particular paradigmatic lens, worldview, value, and political commitment.

As the researcher, you actively create the link among problem, purpose, and methodology through a process of reflecting on your research problem and purpose, focusing on researchable questions, and considering how to best address these questions. A central issue for qualitative research is that there are considerable differences in epistemological positions that methodological choices are informed by (and inform). Scholars have argued that the different qualitative methodologies are also underpinned by particular theoretical assumptions, and that consistency between their philosophical positions and methods should be clear and focused. All the study's components should therefore be interconnected and interrelated so that the study itself is a grounded and cohesive whole rather than the sum of fragmented or isolated parts. Thinking along these lines affords a research study “methodological congruence” (Richards & Morse, 2013). O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) also emphasize that methodological congruence is inextricably linked to quality in quality research, stating: “The different methodological approaches are informed by different ontological and epistemological foundations, and these fundamentally influence everything about how the research is conceptualized, actioned, and analyzed” (p. 68).

There are numerous qualitative methodologies, each of which has ways of defining a research topic; critically engaging the literature on that topic; identifying significant research problems; designing the study; and collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data so that it will be most relevant and meaningful. Each of the methodologies includes ideological, conceptual, and methodological implications. Understanding the logic behind a research methodology allows your study to be appropriately positioned within an inquiry tradition and also lays the foundation for supporting your study's findings. The position of the researcher, in essence, is the bridge between philosophy, methodology, and the application of methods. Thus, the alignment between the research question, chosen methodology, and personal philosophy, as well as the ability of the researcher to be reflexive in relation to the research, is critical to ensure congruence in the study that will be manifested in the products of the research.

Having decided on a qualitative research approach, you will proceed to design your study within the framework of one of the methodologies (traditions or genres) of qualitative inquiry. At the outset of any study, the researcher needs to carefully consider a number of important methodological issues, not least of all the theoretical perspectives that drive a particular methodology and how these fit with the proposed study. Thus, the components of the design process (theoretical framework, research purpose, and methods of data collection and data analysis) will reflect the principles and features that characterize the chosen qualitative methodology. As the researcher, you must carefully consider how these components relate to the study goals, driving questions, guiding theories, and commitments. You should be asking:

- Which methodology does my intended research topic and problem “fit best” with?
- What is the purpose of my research?

- Is my worldview aligned with the methodology selected? Why? Why not?
- Is the methodology a comfortable match with my research skills?

Bearing in mind that qualitative methodologies are informed by different ontological and epistemological foundations—and that the researcher's values and assumptions fundamentally influence everything about how research is conceptualized, conducted, analyzed, and presented—you will need to be somewhat knowledgeable about the various qualitative research methodologies, including their key philosophical underpinnings and characteristic applications. Next is a review of the most common qualitative methodologies.

A. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Case Study

Case study is a qualitative methodology for providing an intensive description and contextual-bounded analysis of a social phenomenon (or multiple bounded phenomena), be this a social unit or a system such as a program, institution, process, event, or concept (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lichtman, 2014; Stake, 1995, 2005; Yin, 2018). Single case study and multiple case study are among the most widely used and versatile qualitative methodologies. One of the key attributes of case study is that it reflects a bounded system or a “case.” To identify and define the case, you would begin by asking questions about how the case will be bound and what specifically will be analyzed within the bounded system—that is, the unit of analysis. This methodology is an exploratory form of inquiry that affords significant interaction with research participants, providing an in-depth picture of the unit of study. The researcher explores the bounded system (or bounded systems) over time through in-depth data collection methods involving multiple data sources. Case study research produces a detailed description of a setting and its participants, accompanied by an analysis of the data for themes, patterns, and issues.

B. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Ethnography

Ethnography is associated with the social sciences, including folklore, anthropology, history, urban development, education, linguistics, communication, culture studies, and sociology. As both a method and a product, ethnography has multiple intellectual traditions located in diverse disciplines. Ethnographers may be interested in social change (critical ethnography) or focused on studying populations that have been marginalized or overlooked (feminist ethnography, confessional ethnography). A researcher may be interested in her or his own personal experience and become the subject of her or his own research in order to think more analytically and reflexively about this experience within the broader societal context (autoethnography). Among emergent techniques are ethnographic novels and visual ethnography including photography, video, and electronic media. Due to the diversity within the methodology of ethnography, it is important for researchers working within this approach to be transparent regarding which epistemological position informs their work.

The ethnographic researcher studies a cultural or social group (or subgroup) in its natural setting, closely examining customs and ways of life, with the aim of describing and interpreting cultural patterns of behavior, values, and practices (Van Maanen, 1988, 1995, 2006). Rooted in cultural anthropology, the ethnographer enters into a close interaction with participants in their natural settings as “participant observer” to seek an in-depth understanding of how

individuals in different cultures and subcultures make sense of their lived reality. Fieldwork is a cornerstone of ethnography and involves the researcher's active participation and "immersion" in a community or setting over an extended period of time. Data are collected through interviews, observations, document/artifact analyses, and examination of life histories. Research findings recreate shared beliefs, meanings, practices, social interactions, and behaviors of a connected group of people.

C. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a way of thinking that emphasizes the need for researchers to achieve an understanding of their participants' worlds from the participants' points of view and the ways in which those participants make sense of the world around them. As such, a phenomenological design is not a suitable design when the researcher has a problem-solving purpose.

Phenomenology is both a philosophy and a method, the purpose of which is to investigate the meaning of the *lived experience* of people in order to identify the core essence of human experience or phenomena as described by research participants themselves. Types of phenomenological research include realistic, constitutive, existential, and hermeneutical. The epistemological position of phenomenology is that the knowledge gained through the research process should reflect the participants' perspectives regarding the ways in which they make sense of their worlds. Phenomenology does not endeavor to develop a theory to explain the world; rather, the aim is to facilitate deeper insight to help us maintain greater contact within the world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; van Manen, 1990, 2016). Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common, the basic purpose of research being to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. Experience (*verstehen*) is to be examined as it actually occurs, and on its own terms, and this is seen as more important than the researcher's own understanding of that experience. The congruence with regard to the epistemological foundation ensures that the interpretation provided is that of the participants rather than the researchers. Data collection occurs through interviews, written surveys, art, and photographs, all of which can provide insight into the human experience. An emergent coding strategy such as open or selective coding is usually used, and depending upon the number of participants in the study, the thematic analysis may include both individual and collective.

D. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Grounded Theory

The purpose of grounded theory is to inductively generate theory about a particular behavioral phenomenon that is grounded in, or emerges from, the data. Theory can be defined as "an explanatory scheme comprising a set of concepts related to each other through logical patterns of connectivity" (Schwandt, 2016). The goal is to move beyond description and to have the researcher generate or discover a theory of social processes, actions, or interactions that are grounded in the views of the research participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Study participants would all have experienced the process, and the development of theory might explain practice or provide a framework for further research.

Grounded theory draws on data from a subgroup of individuals from a substantive area. Research involves multiple recurrent stages of data collection and the refinement of abstract categories of information. Theory development is a continual process of generating meaning and of

building consensus to explain phenomena from the people experiencing the phenomena. Open coding, followed by selective coding intertwined with memo writing, are hallmarks of grounded theory analysis. The epistemological premise of grounded theory assumes that the theoretical knowledge to be gained through research cannot be presupposed. As such, the methodological approach is congruent with this premise and regards knowledge production as something that can be gained only through an inductive process (Charmaz, 2016; Charmaz, Thornberg & Keane, 2018). Furthermore, due to this unfolding process, the methodology promotes iterative cycles of simultaneous data collection and analysis.

E. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Narrative Inquiry

The intent of narrative research is to develop a deep and nuanced description of a person, place, or event. The narrative researcher is immersed in the complexity of the multiple layers of stories human beings live day to day. The information gleaned from the story or stories is then retold or “restoried” by the researcher into a “narrative chronology” in order to provide the meaning of experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, the narrative combines views from the participants’ lives with those of the researcher’s life, culminating in a collaborative narrative (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Clandinin, 2007, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Daiute, 2014; Kim, 2016). Paramount to all narrative work is the centrality of relationship in the research process and recognition of the sacredness of the stories that participants share and trust within the research environment (Mills & Birks, 2014). Uncertainty and tension guide the work, and rather than produce conclusive findings, the process offers understanding and meaning. There is an inherent reflexivity in narrative research that demands the attention of the researcher and the participant collaborators as the story emerges and evolves through multiple iterations.

Narrative researchers hold a range of different ontological and epistemological positions. Narrative inquiry relies on observations, interviews, field notes, text data, and other artifacts such as photos, videos, artwork, journals, or letters to provide data for a descriptive analysis. Interview methods are the primary data collection tool, however, as interviews offer a basis for sharing power and allowing participants to tell their stories in their own ways and on their own terms. The purpose of narrative analysis is to help readers understand why and how things happened (or didn’t happen) in the way they did and help them empathize with the protagonist’s lived experience. There are various analytic models and typologies of narrative analysis, and under the broad rubric of narrative inquiry, each of these retains an integrity that permeates throughout data collection and data analysis, as such, maintaining an internal congruence with its theoretical roots.

F. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: Action Research

Action research is a systematic, collaborative, and democratic orientation toward inquiry that seeks effective solutions to complex problems that people confront in their communities and organizations (McNiff, 2018; Mertler, 2017; Stringer, 2014). Especially valuable to those involved in professional, organizational, educational, and community research, action research focuses on specific situations that people encounter by engaging them in collaborative relationships and working on developing localized solutions. Action research challenges the claim of neutrality and objectivity by traditional social science

standards and seeks full collaborative inquiry by all participants, often to engage in sustained change in organizations, institutions, or communities. This methodology blurs the distinction between researcher and participants, creating an ideally democratic inquiry process to collaboratively question practice, make changes, and evaluate the impact of those changes (Stringer, 2014). Participatory action research (PAR) draws heavily on the concept of emancipation as articulated by Freire (1968/1970) that sustainable empowerment and development must begin with the concerns of the marginalized and entails a cycle of research, reflection, and action.

Being about collaborative and democratic practices makes the research essentially political because it aims to influence processes of change. The research itself is an intervention because it seeks to promote actual change by informing and impacting a practice, procedure, system, or environment, thereby leading to the improvement of life for a desired targeted group of individuals. The strength of action research is indeed its focus on generating solutions to practical problems or issues and its ability to empower those working in practice-based environments by engaging them in the research process. As such, the most influential theoretical framework for action research is critical theory, as it aims to encourage and facilitate inclusion and active participation.

G. Choosing the Appropriate Methodology: The Critical Genres

In the past two decades, a critical turn has taken place in the social sciences, humanities, and applied fields, with scholars challenging the historical assumptions of neutrality in inquiry, asserting that all research is fundamentally political (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The critical traditions, including postmodern, poststructural, and postcolonial perspectives, contribute to critical discourse analysis. A variety of emergent genres are situated within the critical paradigm, including critical ethnography, autoethnography, critical discourse analysis, critical race theory and analysis, feminist approaches (increasingly referred to as gender studies), indigenous research, queer/quare theory and analysis, trans theory, and cultural studies. Critical genres are grounded in theories that assume society is structured in such a way to maintain the oppression of marginalized groups. Each genre embraces changing existing social structures and processes as a primary purpose and has openly political agendas and emancipatory goals. It is increasingly argued that research involves issues of power and positionality and that traditionally conducted social science research has silenced groups in society by making these groups the passive objects of inquiry. Viewing qualitative inquiry through a critical lens forces us to rethink taken-for-granted frameworks, paradigms, methodologies, and politics, and advocates for a critical stance that addresses social justice, decolonization, and the politics of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Critical research is skeptical of narratives, viewing these as containing power-laden discourses developed for the maintenance of dominant ideas or the power of individuals, institutions, or theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Deconstruction of grand narratives is viewed as an important way of removing their power (Grbich, 2013). In recognition of the socially constructed nature of the world, meaning rather than knowledge is sought because knowledge is seen as constrained by the discourses and dominant points of view that were developed to protect powerful interests and ideological forces that serve to constrain knowledge building. A critical approach asks questions about the historical forces that shape societal patterns as well as the fundamental issues and dilemmas of power, positionality, policy, and domination in institutions,

including their role in reproducing and reinforcing inequity and social injustice. The key purpose is to address, challenge, and hopefully change problematic social circumstances.

Research Methodology and Research Methods

Methodology determines how the researcher thinks about a study, how decisions about the study are made, and how researchers position themselves to engage with participants and with the data that are generated. The term *methods* commonly denotes specific techniques, procedures, or tools used by researchers to generate and analyze data. The methods that a qualitative researcher chooses are informed by both the research approach and the research methodology so that there is a conceptual fit across all levels. *Research design* is the way you as the researcher plan for, articulate, and set up the *doing* of your study, and applying the chosen methods.

O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) write extensively on the necessity for congruence between ontology, epistemology, and methodology in terms of how this informs the choice of methods for data collection and data analysis in qualitative research. Based on the research questions, specific data collection methods are chosen to gather the required information in the most appropriate and meaningful way. A solid rationale for the choice of methods used is crucial, as this indicates methodological congruence and illustrates that the choice of methods is grounded in the chosen methodology and in the study's overall research design. Before you can collect any data, therefore, a clear and aligned statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and research question(s) must be developed, followed by the development of a data collection protocol that clearly address the research question(s).

A researcher can tend to become comfortable with a particular method or set of methods, and this can lead to misalignment of research goals. It is unwise to arbitrarily select a method without carefully considering what kinds of data you are seeking. A clear, logical, and direct relationship must be established between the intent of the study and what and how data will be collected. Choice of method is therefore based on relevance and value. The most commonly used types of qualitative data collection methods involve interviews, observations, focus groups, and document reviews:

- Interviewing techniques include unstructured, semistructured, or structured; can be formal or informal; and can occur once or multiple times.
- Observational techniques can be obtrusive or unobtrusive and either participant or nonparticipant.
- Focus groups are essentially group interviews. Researcher skill is required for facilitation, recording, and reporting.
- Document review refers to the collection of data from written artifacts including policies, legislation, lesson plans, mission statements, letters, memos, posters, diaries, and other forms of written text. Artifacts and visual material such as photos, blogs, artwork, music, or graffiti are also considered appropriate documentary material.

Many of the qualitative methodologies include specific and dedicated research methods that are integral to the research design and sequence. To achieve triangulation, qualitative studies usually combine several data collection methods over the course of the study. When considering the use of various methods, the researcher should carefully consider whether

these methods will address and can be applied to the research questions while at the same time ensuring that these methods are also crucial to maintaining integrity with regard to the research methodology.

A. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Case Study

Data collection in case study research is typically extensive and draws on multiple methods of data collection including interviews, document review, observation, focus groups, surveys, life history, and critical incidents. Indeed, one of the strengths of the case study approach is its methodological eclecticism; that is, a variety of methods can be used, including methods that generate quantitative data such as statistical data provided by census material. Remember, however, while case studies incorporate many types of data (qualitative and quantitative), not all these data may be appropriate for your particular study. Methods vary depending on the particular case and related research questions. It is therefore important to take into account the important link between research questions and the type of data that will serve to answer your questions.

Triangulation is critical in attempting to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study; adds rigor, breadth, and depth to the study; and provides corroborative evidence of the data obtained. In triangulation, the researcher makes use of multiple and different sources and methods, and these are reported as part of the research design, including peer review or peer debriefing (which provides an external check of the research process) and member checks (where participants' views are solicited regarding the credibility of findings, analyses, and interpretations).

B. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Ethnography

Ethnographers seek to study the meaning of the behavior, interaction, and communication among members of the culture-sharing group by describing and analyzing patterns of roles, artifacts, and ceremonies of the cultural group. Rooted in cultural anthropology, ethnography involves extended observations, with the researcher as participant observer becoming immersed in the day-to-day lives of the research participants. Fieldwork is a cornerstone of ethnography, typically involving the researcher's participation in a community or setting over an extended period of time. To produce a holistic "cultural portrait," the researcher gains access to the group through "gatekeepers" and "key informants." Both the process and the outcome of research ethnography are ways of examining a culture-sharing group as well as the final written product of that research.

Ethnographers typically study groups, communities, or organizations by making use of a variety of data collection methods, including participant observation, interviews, document review, and artifacts. As with all the qualitative methodologies, decisions about data collection methods should be guided by your research questions. In an ethnographic study, data are collected on an ongoing basis, and data collection and data analysis proceed simultaneously. Ethnographic interviewing is an elaborate system consisting of a series of interviews to tap into participants' cultural knowledge. This interviewing approach is grounded in cognitive anthropology and seeks to elicit the cognitive structures that reveal participants' worldviews. The value of the ethnographic interview lies in its focus on culture from the participants' perspectives and through firsthand encounters. This approach generates a typology of categories of meaning, thereby highlighting the nuances of the culture. Observation is typically included as a data

collection method, and it is important that the researcher be aware that there are multiple levels of observation contained within a setting. Often what is not present or obvious is just as important as what is present and obvious.

C. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Phenomenology

Phenomenological research involves studying a small number of subjects through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). In this process, the researcher “brackets” her or his own experiences to understand the participants’ experiences (van Manen, 1990). The notion of bracketing is considered one of the key elements that distinguish Husserlian phenomenology. Heidegger, Husserl’s pupil, moved phenomenology from a descriptive to an interpretive endeavor, focusing on the hermeneutic perspective, which recognizes that human existence is always embedded in a world of meanings. Therefore, phenomenology becomes hermeneutical when its method becomes interpretive rather than purely descriptive (Mills & Birks, 2014).

Phenomenology (including Hermeneutics as a method for examining text) typically involves several in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals might share. This approach to data collection rests on the assumption that there is a structure and an essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. The value of phenomenological interviewing is that it permits an explicit focus on the researcher’s personal experience combined with those of the research participants by focusing on deep lived meanings that guide actions and interactions. The researcher, in taking on a reflexive stance, reflects on essential themes that constitute the nature of this lived experience. The researcher then writes a description of the phenomenon, maintaining a strong relationship to the topic of inquiry. Phenomenology is not only description, however; it is also an interpretive process in which the researcher interprets the meaning of individual lived experience.

D. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Grounded Theory

The objective of grounded theory is to generate theory from the data or modify or extend existing theory. Grounded theory researchers approach interviews and documents for the theoretical usefulness of the data, seeking to analyze the meaning that the data convey and thereby developing theoretical categories. The researcher works to integrate categories into a theoretical framework that specifies causes, conditions, and consequences of the studied process. Through theoretical sampling coupled with theoretical sensitivity, the researcher strives to ensure that the raw data are reflected or grounded in the final theory produced.

Data collection and data analysis are concurrent and continual activities. Open-ended interviews and observations are used to collect data. Analysis involves a number of strategic methods that facilitate the development of a theory that is grounded in the data. Researchers typically begin with *open coding*—that is, coding data for major categories of information. From this type of coding, *axial coding* emerges—that is, identification of one open-coding category as the “core phenomenon.” This process gives way to *causal conditions* (factors that cause the “core phenomenon”), *strategies* (actions taken in response to the “core phenomenon”), *contextual and intervening conditions* (situational factors that influence the strategies), and *consequences* (outcomes as a result of the strategies). The final step in the process is *selective coding*; that is, the researcher develops propositions or hypotheses that interrelate the categories or assemble

a story line that describes the interrelationships among categories. Thus the theory developed by the researcher is articulated toward the end of the study, with the intent of having explanatory power to make a significant contribution in terms of knowledge building and potential practical application.

E. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is an interdisciplinary methodology that draws from traditions in literary theory, oral history, drama, psychology, folklore, and film philosophy (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). The assumption is that people construct their realities through narrating their stories. Inquiry involves a collaboration between the researcher and participants that is established over time in the storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences.

Narrative inquiry begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals or cultures. In this form of research, the researcher studies the lives of one or more individuals through the telling of stories, including poetry, play, or performance. Life history is an integral research technique as developed by the Chicago School of Sociology. This data collection method offers a basis for sharing power by allowing research participants to tell their stories in their own ways. The information gleaned from the story or stories is then retold or “restored” by the researcher into a “narrative chronology” in order to provide the meaning of experiences (Kim, 2016). Ultimately, the narrative combines views from the participants’ lives with those of the researcher’s life, culminating in a collaborative narrative that offers understanding and meaning (Andrews et al., 2013; Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006; Daiute, 2014; Kim, 2016). Paramount to all narrative work is the centrality of relationship in the research process and recognition of the sacredness of the stories that participants share and trust within the research environment (Mills & Birks, 2014).

In narrative inquiry, data analysis and interpretation work in tandem because data are analyzed and interpreted concurrently to develop an understanding of narrative meanings. Kim (2016) talks about “flirting with the data,” which includes looking for common elements, noticing differences and diversity, and seeking metaphors. Typically, field notes and interview transcriptions are shared with the narrator, and the written analysis may be constructed collaboratively. As such, there is recognition that the researcher is not just passively recording and reporting the narrator’s reality. There is a reflexivity inherent in narrative research that demands the attention of the researcher and the participant collaborators as the story and its meaning emerges and evolves through multiple iterations.

F. Choosing Appropriate Methods: Action Research

In action research, many different data collection methods are used, including observation, interview, and focus group. Participatory action research draws heavily on the concept of emancipation as proposed by Freire (1968/1970) and entails cycles of research, reflection, and action. This action routine provides a simple yet powerful cyclical framework that enables people to commence on a shared and productive process of inquiry in a stepwise fashion and to build greater detail into procedures as the complexity of issues increases. This approach is based on the assumption that all stakeholders—those whose lives are affected by the problem under study—should be involved in the research process in order to inform understanding and subsequent action. Knowledge production unfolds and proceeds as a collective process, actively engaging people who have previously been the “subjects” of research to collectively investigate

and reconcile their own situation. When ideally executed, action research creates a fully democratic inquiry process, blurring the distinctions between the researcher and participants to collaboratively question practice, make changes, and evaluate the impact of those changes.

The research protocol is iterative, cyclical, and participative in nature and is intended to foster deeper understanding of a given situation, starting with conceptualizing and particularizing the problem and moving through several proposed interventions and evaluations. Data collection and analysis are interwoven throughout the research process to produce understanding and inform future action. When practitioners use action research, it has the potential to increase the amount they learn consciously from their experience; the action research cycle can be regarded as a learning cycle. Action research studies often have direct relevance to improving practice and advocating for change.

G. Choosing Appropriate Methods: The Critical Genres

Inquiry in critical traditions is conceived as contributing to radical change or emancipation from oppressive social structures, either through sustained critique or through direct advocacy and action taken by the researcher, often in collaboration with participants. Researchers working within a critical framework ask themselves what will be the outcome of their research in terms of making some impact on a larger social purpose. Learning to formulate research questions that examine power relations between the researcher and research participants is at the heart of critical approaches. Reflexive subjectivity of the researcher—that is, constant reflective and self-critical processes—therefore becomes an essential component of data collection and data analysis. The researcher and the researched are not considered separate entities; rather, through interpretation, their constructed meanings become interwoven (Grbich, 2013).

Research Problem and Literature Review

The study's literature review is a vital component of the dissertation research process, serving to contextualize your study in the following ways:

- Traces the etiology or history of the specific fields and topics related to your study's research problem.
- Cultivates familiarity and expertise regarding issues and debates in the field, providing context and background for the research problem.
- Identifies key theories related to the phenomenon and/or context under study and which of these will most appropriately frame and situate your study.
- Assists with developing an argument for the rationale and significance of your research.

The literature review must be relevant and appropriate for the specific study at hand. Each body of literature that you review must be tied to or address some aspect of the research problem. You should be asking:

- To what extent does my literature review frame the context of my specific research problem?

- To what extent does my literature review highlight the significance of my study?
- To what extent does my literature review address the historical and current relevance of my research problem?

Literature Review and Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

The terms theoretical framework and conceptual framework are often used interchangeably throughout the literature. Whereas a deductive approach to literature review typically makes use of theories and theoretical frameworks, the inductive approach tends to lead to the development of a conceptual framework, which may take the form of a conceptual model (Imenda, 2014). The conceptual or theoretical framework that you choose must be clearly situated within the body of literature that is being reviewed. Theory (or concepts) helps to situate a study within ongoing conversations in relevant fields and adds new dimensions and layers of understanding about the phenomenon of interest, hence extending the meaningfulness of your study's data. An important part of theory (or concepts) in the dissertation is that inclusion serves to make an argument for the rationale and significance of your study. You should be asking:

- In what theory or concept is my study grounded or based?
- To what extent does my conceptual or theoretical framework explicate the ways in which theory or concepts contribute to or addresses this study?

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework, Research Questions, and Research Findings

A well-conceived conceptual or theoretical framework should serve to guide your study and play a central role throughout the entire research process. As explained by Ravitch and Riggan (2017) and Ravitch and Carl (2016), the framework generates the focus of the research as much as it is informed and shaped by it. The framework offers a source of thinking, planning, and conscious action throughout the research process, helping to situate your study within its appropriate context, grounding the researcher's philosophical stance, and articulating how all key methodological elements are related. As O'Reilly & Kiyimba (2015) discuss, collection and analytic methods should be born out of a transparent theoretical framework so that the work is rigorous, trustworthy, and has veracity.

A theoretical/conceptual framework, research design, and research methodology together must generate data appropriate and adequate for responding to the research questions. Ravitch and Carl (2016) explain that the framework contributes to creating relevant research questions and then matching the methodological aspects of the study with these questions. As these authors state, "In this sense, the conceptual framework helps align the analytic tools and methods of a study with the focal topics and core constructs as they are embedded in the research questions" (2016, p. 37). Research questions are initially linked to the research problem and may also be theoretically linked based on the literature and related research, thereby illustrating that the study holds potential significance for that field. While the theoretical/conceptual framework makes the case for why a study is significant

and how the study design appropriately answers the research questions, it also becomes the repository for the study's findings, which in turn provide answers to the research questions. Findings and interpretation must be integrated with the literature and theoretical/conceptual framework.

Research Methodology, Research Design, and Data Analysis

Research design is the way you as the researcher plan for, articulate, and set up the *doing* of your study. It is the overall approach regarding the many ways in which you bridge the context of your study, including the development of your study's purpose, research questions, data collection methods, and methods of data analysis. Qualitative analysis encompasses the processes that are needed to make sense and meaning of the data. Data analysis includes a variety of recursive processes for looking across your data set, including examining raw data, developing and applying multiple coding processes that combine to create categories, identification of emerging patterns within categories, and construction of analytic themes that reflect important concepts in the data. In turn, these themes ultimately become your study's findings, which are interpreted in light of the literature and theoretical perspectives.

While data analysis in qualitative research is typically composed of the previously mentioned processes, the actual methods of data analysis must be informed by and contingent upon both your research design and research methodology. While qualitative researchers share a common appreciation of the analytic process, there are some key philosophical differences among the various qualitative methodologies, and each of the methodologies promotes specific strategies for data analysis. It is imperative, therefore, that each methodology retains an integrity and congruence between ontology, epistemology, and methods used. Because different qualitative research traditions or genres promote specific strategies for data analysis, whatever analytic approach you choose to use must align with the philosophical underpinnings of your chosen methodology. When a researcher mistakenly attempts to engage in research by starting with methods and choosing an analytic approach after the data have been collected, it is evident the parameters of a particular methodology have not been considered, and the risk is that the research will lack integrity and trustworthiness.

A. Data Analysis: Case Study

The type of analysis associated with case study research can be a holistic analysis of an entire case or an embedded analysis of part of a case (Yin, 2018). Throughout data collection, a detailed description of the social processes that constitute a bounded entity emerges. The researcher develops themes to be analyzed, not for generalizing beyond the case but for understanding the dynamics and complexity of the case itself. When a study involves multiple cases, the researcher will examine and describe themes within each case (within-case analysis), followed by thematic analysis across cases (cross-case analysis). Analysis and interpretation of case study takes place in an iterative manner. The researcher collects data, analyzes it to see what the data are saying (analysis), and seeks to understand what it means (interpretation). This process builds trustworthiness and also provides an audit trail. While case study is characterized by methodological eclecticism, the centrality of contextualized deep understanding as the ultimate objective is recognized as key.

B. Data Analysis: Ethnography

Ethnographers analyze data for a description of the culture-sharing group, including emergent themes and an overall interpretation. Patterns of behavior and thinking indicate how and in what ways the cultural group works and lives, leading to an overall illustration of “how a system works” (Fetterman, 2010). Ethnographic data analysis takes place as an ongoing activity and is an activity that is intertwined with data gathering. Ethnographic analysis is an inductive process—that is, a process of working to discover what the data mean. Description is at the core of analysis, and researcher interpretation provides a window into the research setting and its meaning. Ethnography relies on extended fieldwork, and data collection and data analysis are concurrent. Analysis and interpretation go back and forth as the story comes together as a meaningful whole. To counteract ethnocentrism, the researcher takes on emic and etic perspectives but at the same time runs the risk of going native; that is, the researcher identifies so completely with the group that she or he can no longer step back and take an objective perspective. Because of this fine interplay and balance of forces, triangulation of observations and data sources becomes particularly important in ethnographic research.

C. Data Analysis: Phenomenology

Analysis in phenomenological research proceeds from the central assumption that there is an *essence* to an experience that is shared with others who have had a similar experience. As such, the experiences of those participating in the study are analyzed as unique expressions and then examined in order to identify and distill the essence. The focus is on “life as lived”—that is, the “lived experience.” Phenomenological research makes use of significant statements, the generation of meaning units, and the development of an “essence” description (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers who use this approach are reluctant to describe specific analytic techniques, fearing that these might be seen as rules and become inflexible (Hycner, 1985). As such, the focus is on attitude and the response to the phenomenon under study. The aim is to achieve an analytic description of the phenomena not affected by prior assumptions.

Building on data from the first and second research questions (“What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?” and “What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?”), data analysis is an attempt to highlight “significant statements” that provide understanding and insight with regard to how participants experience the phenomenon, which Moustakas (1994) refers to as “horizontalization.” The researcher then goes on to develop clusters of meaning or themes from these significant statements. Themes lead to textural and structural description. Van Manen (1990) refers to data analysis as “phenomenological reflection” in order to be able to grasp essential meaning. The researcher typically employs member checking whereby participants review the researcher’s interpretations and descriptions.

D. Data Analysis: Grounded Theory

Data analysis in grounded theory starts at the moment of initial contact with the phenomenon being studied and continues throughout the development of a grounded theory. The constant comparative method is used for data analysis and involves an interplay among the researcher, the data, the emerging categories, and the developing theory. Theoretical sensitivity is important on the part of the researcher in order to be able to determine what

kind of data need to be collected and what aspects of the data are most important for the grounded theory.

Central to grounded theory are three stages to analysis that include procedures for identifying and naming the data and developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories and looking for relationships among them (axial coding), and looking for the story line of the theory by reflecting on the data and the findings that were produced during open coding and axial coding (selective coding). The theory is then rechecked with the data and with the published literature for additional ideas in developing the grounded theory and understanding its broader significance, thereby ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions (Birks & Mills, 2015; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Holton & Walsh, 2017).

Constant comparative analysis is a foundational pillar of classic grounded theory. Through the comparative processes of axial coding, categories are related to one another, with a search for causal explanations for events and interactions. Coding and memoing are the key heuristic techniques in constant comparative analysis. As Holton and Walsh (2017) explain, the conceptualization of data through coding and memoing is the foundation of grounded theory analysis, with the goal being the discovery of a latent pattern of social behavior that might explain an issue or concern. This latent pattern analysis approach spotlights and unravels the complexity of embedded and often subtle patterns of behavior in a social setting to reveal a plan of action. This pattern, the “core category,” emerges as data are open coded and conceptualized. Once the pattern emerges, the analysis shifts to concentrate theoretically sampling and selectively coding further data in order to elaborate and eventually saturate the core category and any other concepts that have some relationship to the core. As such, the constant comparative approach begins with the first data that is collected, continues on to theoretical saturation and, finally, integration.

E. Data Analysis: Narrative Inquiry

Data analysis in narrative inquiry is analyzed for the story it has to tell. This involves interpretation, which in turn affects how we as researchers represent our research findings. One may construe analysis and interpretation as two separate concepts, as analysis may imply objectivity, and interpretation may imply subjectivity. However, in narrative inquiry, these two concepts work in tandem because the data are analyzed in order to develop an understanding of the *narrative meaning* of research participants’ lived experiences through storytelling, and these meanings are interpreted concurrently with their analysis (Clandinin, 2007; Kim, 2016).

Narrative analysis can occur by way of a variety of methods such as the “paradigmatic mode of analysis” (which relies on paradigmatic cognition, a thinking skill that humans use to organize experiences as organized and consistent) or a “narrative mode of analysis” (based on narrative cognition that attends to the particular and special characteristics of human action that take place in a particular setting). One of the means of data analysis and interpretation involves what Kim (2016) refers to as “narrative smoothing,” a method that is used to make participants’ stories coherent and engaging. As Kim explains,

It is like brushing off the rough edges of disconnected raw data. However it can also be problematic because it involves certain omissions, such as the selective reporting of some data (while ignoring other data), or the lack of context due to the researcher’s assumption that what is clear to him or her will also be clear to the reader. (p. 192)

Kim (2016) offers a detailed account of different methods and models of analysis in narrative inquiry. Essentially, analysis and interpretation work in tandem to find narrative meaning in the process of storytelling, retelling, and reliving of personal experiences. Typically, field notes and interview transcriptions are shared with the narrator so that the written analysis may be constructed collaboratively. As such, there is recognition that the researcher is not just passively recording and reporting the narrator's own reality.

F. Data Analysis: Action Research

Action research encompasses a set of consciously collaborative and democratic strategies for generating knowledge and designing action in which trained experts in social research and other stakeholders work together. Action research can create large amounts of qualitative and/or quantitative data in need of analysis to provide effective interpretations for the implementation of positive change. The data analysis and interpretation process needs to be accurate and clearly understandable for all stakeholders to gain their input regarding identifying and supporting possible solutions to the problems that are being researched. Data analysis and interpretation can also potentially support the development of community building necessary for assisting with long-term implementation of possible solutions, as well as identifying and addressing emergent problems or issues.

The research protocol is iterative, cyclical, and participative in nature and is intended to foster deeper understanding of a given problem situation, starting with conceptualizing and particularizing the problem and moving through several interventions and evaluations. Data collection and analysis are interwoven in the process. The purpose of data analysis in action research is very clearly twofold: to produce understanding or theory and to inform future action.

Because the researcher's role is that of facilitator who questions, problem-poses, and consults, the research is less about producing a report that includes findings and more about lessons learned and changes considered and/or made. Depending on the interests and needs of participants, a written report may be collaboratively produced, or an oral report or visual display illustrating lessons that were learned or changes accomplished could become the final research product. Reporting, whatever form it takes based on mutual collaboration between researcher and participants, has inherent relevance and meaning with regard to societal improvement, either directly or indirectly.

G. Data Analysis: The Critical Genres

The critical and postmodern turns in critical inquiry, characterized by skepticism toward master narratives and grand theories, have been directed toward *phronesis* (Marshall & Rossman 2016); that is, practical contextualized knowledge that is responsive to its environment. Critical genres are grounded in theories that assume society is structured in order to maintain the oppression of marginalized groups. Reflexive subjectivity of the researcher—that is, constant reflective and self-critical processes—is an essential component of data collection and data analysis, which are ongoing and intertwined. The focus is on asking questions that examine historical and current inequity and oppression, and through this questioning process uncovering and unraveling hegemonic forces of policy, power, and dominance in institutions, including their role in reproducing and reinforcing inequity, oppression, and discrimination. The researcher and the researched

are not considered separate entities; through interpretation, their constructed meanings become interwoven (Grbich, 2013). Inquiry is designed to contribute to radical change or emancipation from oppressive social structures either through a sustained critique or through direct advocacy or action taken by the researcher, often in collaboration with participants in the study.

Research Methodology, Research Design, and Presentation of Findings

By way of *data analysis*, you are forming a record of frequently occurring phenomena or patterns of behavior. Once you have established patterns, these patterns need to be explained. This is where *interpretation or representing of findings* comes into play. Whereas data analysis presents the findings of your research by organizing data from various sources into categories to produce a readable narrative, the purpose of representation of findings is to provide interpretative insights into your study's findings themselves. During the writing and representation phase of research, the researcher allows a story to emerge, and as we try to most meaningfully and effectively communicate our research findings, we must keep our intended audience at the forefront. Your presentation will hopefully lead your audience to understand your findings as clearly as you do. Remember, organization and presentation of findings must align with

- research design (qualitative research),
- research methodology (qualitative traditions or genres), and
- research questions.

The findings of qualitative research are typically reported in a narrative manner, and qualitative studies usually include extensive samples of quotations from participants, which provide the detail to substantiate the story that you are telling. By using the participants' own words, the researcher aims to build the reader's confidence that the reality of the participants and the situation studied is accurately represented. Methodological challenges posed by intellectual, political, and ethical challenges have increasingly impacted qualitative research design. The complexities presented by new technologies and contexts, including social media networking, have opened the way for innovative and creative modes of presentation. Moreover, there is an increasing demand that research be directly useful to the researched—that is, the research participants and research setting or context. Just as there are clear analytic distinctions among traditions or genres demanding that the researcher will have to think about data analysis in a particular way, so also are there distinct interpretation and representation strategies. As such, the very ways the findings are *represented and presented* are specific to each qualitative methodology or research tradition.

A. Presentation of Findings: Case Study

In case study research, the researcher reports the meaning of the findings—that is, a detailed analysis of themes and the overall lessons learned from the bounded case or cases, which can be an event, process, program, or individual. The findings are typically reported in a narrative manner to include extensive samples of quotations from participants. Findings are presented in such a way to illustrate a response to all research questions.

B. Presentation of Findings: Ethnography

Ethnography is a report of data gathered through multiple methods, typically in-depth interviews and participant observation, where the participants' perspectives are presented. Illustrating in great detail how a culture-sharing group works and lives is the final product of an ethnographic study. The researcher positions herself or himself and strives to provide thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the social context. The final product is in effect a holistic cultural portrait of the group and incorporates the views of the participants (emic) as well as the views of the researcher (etic). Van Maanen (1988, 1995, 2006) recommends presenting ethnographic research through different styles of "tales" as a way of presenting truthful cultural portraits. These include realist tales (displays a realistic account of a culture which is published in a third-person voice), confessional tales (a highly personalized account that displays the author's power of observation that calls attention to building credible and authentic cultural description), and impressionist tales (the researcher relates her or his own experiences as an autoethnographic account. The tale is told through the chronology of events in the research process, drawing attention not only to the culture under study but also to the experiences that were integral to the cultural description and interpretation). The presentation of findings often advocates for the needs of the group, or suggests societal changes or action. Ethnographic products can be narrative, art-based, or performance-based. Performance ethnography is a staged reenactment in which culture is represented through performance (including staged production, artwork, dance, storytelling, or film) rather than text. Much of the work in this vein is aligned with the principles of critical pedagogy.

C. Presentation of Findings: Phenomenology

Whereas a narrative study reports the stories of experiences of a single individual or several individuals, a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their *lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenology has a very strong philosophical component, drawing heavily on the writings of Husserl (1859–1938) and those who expanded on his views, including Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. As such, the basic purpose is to reduce individual experiences to a composite description of the universal essence of experience—that is, according to van Manen (1990), "a grasp of the very nature of the thing" (p. 177). From structural description ("how" things occurred—that is, the context) and textural description of the lived experience of participants ("what" the participants experienced), the researcher writes a composite description that presents the *essence of the phenomenon* or *essential invariant structure*. At its core, phenomenology is the study of the lived experiences and the development of the essence of these experiences rather than explanations or analyses of experience (Moustakas, 1994).

D. Presentation of Findings: Grounded Theory

In a grounded theory study, the result of the process of data collection and data analysis is a theory, a substantial-level theory, written by the researcher. The theory emerges by way of memoing in which the researcher records ideas about the evolving theory throughout the analytic process. The theory may be tested later to determine whether it can be generalized to other

samples or populations, or the study may end at this point with the generation of theory being the end goal of the research.

E. Presentation of Findings: Narrative Inquiry

Regarding presentation of data, a narrative researcher can take a literary orientation or a chronological approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Active collaboration with participants is a key component so that researchers present participants' stories while at the same time remaining reflective about their own personal and political backgrounds and agendas, which of necessity shapes how they "re-story" the account.

F. Presentation of Findings: Action Research

Action research, or the more emancipatory participatory action research (PAR), typically relies on inquiry that is collaboratively developed. Since the goal of this work is improvement (AR) or transformation (PAR), there may be no actual final report. Indeed, a report is often less important than the *process itself* that leads to improvement or transformation. The researcher's role is that of facilitator who questions, problem-poses, and consults. As such, the research is less about producing a report that includes findings and more about lessons learned and changes considered and/or made. Depending on the interests and needs of participants, a written report may be collaboratively produced, or an oral report or visual display illustrating lessons that were learned or changes accomplished could become the final research product. Reporting, whatever form it takes, based on mutual collaboration between researcher and participants has inherent relevance and meaning with regard to societal improvement, either directly or indirectly.

G. Presentation of Findings: The Critical Genres

To illustrate marginality and social oppression, and the impact thereof, critical researchers have an avowedly and explicitly political agenda and make use of narrative, performance, poetry, autoethnography, and ethnographic fiction as their forms of representation. The researcher's goal is to take a stand against social injustice by having greater impact than allowed by an article in an academic journal or book. An emphasis can be on storytelling and the production of counterstories to balance hegemonic representations, thereby providing witness to social injustices and marginalization. Another critical form of representation is that of performance or "cultural performance"—that is, a staged reenactment of the injustice being exposed. This type of representation can be in the form of art-based studies, music, and other forms of media. As evidenced at the many qualitative research conferences over the past decade, critical researchers are increasingly turning their findings into various performative styles, borrowing from the arts and humanities to create a writing genre similar to theater performance.

Critical perspectives include a heightened awareness of and sensitivity to how the researcher represents participants in the study. There is a strong focus on scrutinizing the complex interplay between the researcher's own personal biography, power, and status and the ways in which the researcher interacts with the research participants. A key implication of these concerns is that researchers pay close attention to participants' reactions and to the *voice* they use in their work as a representation of the relationship between themselves and their participants. As pointed

out by Marshall and Rossman (2016), further implication of the critical perspective is that the traditional criteria for judging the trustworthiness of the work have become contested.

Research Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions

Two general rules apply:

- Findings and interpretation together are the basis for drawing trustworthy conclusions.
- Each conclusion should be tied to a respective finding or findings.

The “If/Then/Therefore/Thus Matrix” (Table 11.1 contained in this book) provides a useful way to go about aligning findings and conclusions, and then recommendations. Your conclusions should tie together the major findings and also include a summary of the major research interpretations (what the findings mean). This discussion should be directly linked to answering your research questions. It should be very clear to your reader that your research findings provide a response toward addressing the research problem.

As a general rule of thumb, you should provide at least one conclusion for each finding. However, the process is not altogether linear, and so it is possible that one conclusion can (but does not always) cut across more than one finding. It is important to bear in mind when thinking about and formulating each of your conclusions that they must be logically tied to one another.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Two general rules apply:

- Conclusions are the springboard for developing actionable/doable recommendations.
- Recommendations follow your findings and conclusions. They are the application of those conclusions.

The “If/Then/Therefore/Thus Matrix” (Table 11.1 contained in this book) provides a useful way to go about generating recommendations and making sure that these are aligned with the study’s findings and conclusions.

Chapter Summary

The objective of this chapter is to provide a clear understanding of the concept of alignment in qualitative research by highlighting and clarifying key elements and concepts and explaining how to ensure and check throughout for alignment and therefore methodological integrity and congruence. All of the study’s components should be interconnected and interrelated so that the study itself is a grounded and cohesive whole rather than the sum of fragmented or isolated parts. It should be clear from reading this chapter that methodological integrity and congruence is essential both at a philosophical and a practical level and is an indication of a study of worth and quality. A high-quality dissertation demonstrates additional characteristics as well, regardless of the topic or research methods, including transparency in reporting by way of a logical trail of evidence so that the study can be considered trustworthy. Ensuring alignment, transparency, and trustworthiness helps to clarify how data were collected, coded, analyzed, presented, and

interpreted in ways that directly and clearly provide answers to the study's research questions. Throughout this book, as you will notice, there is a clear focus on achieving alignment among all key elements of the dissertation.

Following are some recommended resources that you might consider perusing regarding establishing alignment and methodological congruence among the various elements of your dissertation.

Annotated Bibliography

Mills, J., & Birks, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Qualitative methodology: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This edited volume focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of major qualitative methodologies: action research, discourse analysis, critical ethnography, grounded theory, historical research, case study, narrative research, and phenomenology. The aim of this book is to provide a practical guide to the very early stages of designing a qualitative study, with the reader being introduced to key concepts as building blocks of this process. Qualitative methodologies as opposed to qualitative methods are the main focus of the book, and the reader is reminded up front that the two terms have very different meanings: A methodology is a set of principles and ideas that inform the design of a research study, whereas methods are practical procedures and techniques used to generate and analyze data. Part 1 of the book addresses the foundations of qualitative research, including its historical development and the concepts of a generic qualitative research process. Part 2 scaffolds the reader's learning by examining eight qualitative methodologies. The authors acknowledge that qualitative research studies are not always clear-cut, and that qualitative researchers will often draw upon a range of research traditions. The focus is on philosophical underpinnings, positioning of the researcher, and alignment of philosophy and methodology with purpose and methods. Part 3 examines the details involved in planning a qualitative study, including strategies for writing a proposal, maintaining ethics, and appraising the quality of a qualitative study. Useful case studies and activities are included in each section.

O'Reilly, M., & Kiyimba, N. (2015). *Advanced qualitative research: A guide to using theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This book addresses the more complex theoretical issues embedded in qualitative research and adopts a reflective stance that emphasizes the nuanced role of the researcher. Throughout each chapter, theory is powerfully and pervasively interwoven in the discussion of its impact on various aspects of the research process. Each chapter has been designed to enable readers to progress in their thinking and practice through an exploration of the key theoretical issues and debates pertinent to quality in qualitative research. A central issue for qualitative research is that there are considerable differences in epistemological positions that methodological positions are informed by (and inform). The authors clearly focus on a move away from mechanical notions of qualitative methods and standardized approaches to research. Instead, they focus on key issues in the field including methodological integrity and congruence, perspective-driven data collection, paradigmatic alignment, and theoretically led analysis. An issue that is very well developed is that which pertains to the value and uniqueness of addressing ethics. The authors outline several key ethical issues including the role and impact of the qualitative researcher, power dynamics inherent in the research process, the iterative and unpredictable nature of research, data and identity protection, and ethics related to data management, dissemination of findings, and

sharing of knowledge within and beyond the academic community, including research participants. The book has both a theoretical and an applied focus and is an important and useful resource for those seeking to practically engage with advanced qualitative research methods.

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2016). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

This text is focused on developing knowledge with regard to the methodological (how to design and conduct qualitative research), theoretical (philosophical underpinnings), and conceptual (the ways the researcher conceives and shapes the study and its multiple components) that is needed to engage in rigorous research. As such, the reader can begin to cultivate, appreciate, and integrate theoretical, methodological, and conceptual knowledge and skills that are needed to engage in a respectful and rigorous research process. The authors provide practical explanations and numerous exercises and resources for how to conduct qualitative research, from design through implementation, analysis, and writing up. The book presents the field of qualitative inquiry in a way that helps readers understand what the authors refer to as “criticality” in research by communicating its foundations and processes with clarity and simplicity while still addressing and capturing its complexity. Of particular note are Chapter 1, which focuses on the role of the researcher (including criticality, reflexivity, collaboration, and rigor); Chapter 2, which provides a detailed and informative overview of the use and importance of conceptual frameworks in qualitative research; Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, which explain the significance and ramifications of a critical qualitative research design, and the integral nature of researcher reflexivity and methodological congruence; Chapter 5, which is an overview of the key methods of data collection in qualitative research; Chapter 7 and Chapter 8, which focus on qualitative data analysis processes, with a strong emphasis on how the analytic process must align with the particular qualitative tradition or genre chosen for the study; and Chapter 9, which deals with presentation and representation of qualitative findings as aligned across genres. Overall, this is an excellent critical text that does not simply provide an overview of qualitative research; it dynamically draws out and highlights the key components and complexities involved in the qualitative research process as they apply to and impact trustworthiness, methodological integrity, and rigor.

Part I: Summary and Discussion

Taking Charge of Yourself and Your Work

Part I of this book addresses the initial and preliminary stages of the dissertation process, and we offer suggestions regarding the various activities involved.

Developing Your Study

- The starting point for any research project involves coming to some decision about a sound, doable topic—that is, the subject of inquiry around a particular research problem that your study will address. Determine what you want to research and what you want to learn.
- Once you have identified a general area of interest, narrow your topic to develop a more clearly refined idea around a researchable problem. Crafting a narrowly defined

problem statement will serve to control the scope of your research, making it a manageable study.

- Develop a working title that can serve as a guide and focus for the study. The working title should remain flexible so that it can be refined and re-refined as your study progresses. Keeping notes about how and why your title changes over time is a useful exercise.
- Select a qualitative methodology (tradition or genre) based on the nature of your research problem and your study's purpose and research questions. You will then be able to proceed to design your study within the framework of the appropriate methodology, with the components of the design process aligning with and reflecting characteristic principles and features.
- Draft a proposal that consists of the first three chapters of what will become your dissertation—introduction, literature review, and methodology. Your proposal is brought forth to a hearing by a committee for endorsement and approval to proceed, and gaining approval is therefore a major step on the road to completing your dissertation.
- Check on institutional and/or program-related requirements with regard to all dissertation proposal requirements. Keep in mind that the proposal will also require a review by your university's institutional review board.

Working With Your Committee

- Seek a suitable advisement team. Each university has a different system in this regard, and you need to make sure of your institution's and/or program's policies and procedures.
- Understand that students and faculty are partner stakeholders in the dissertation process. Be aware of student and faculty expectations and responsibilities. This is a necessary element in the dissertation process that many students are not clear about, and hence they have unfulfilled expectations and can therefore tend to make unnecessary demands.

Preparing Yourself and Managing Your Time

- Understanding the elements that constitute each section of your dissertation is a necessary first step. Become familiar with the relationships between and among the multiple components that constitute a dissertation, including the technical (micro), practical (macro), and conceptual (meta) aspects.
- Overcome your anxieties and frustrations by viewing and tackling your work in increments—piece by piece, step by step. Action leads to progress, and progress leads to increasing levels of confidence, which is vital to maintaining momentum.
- The time commitment involved in doing your dissertation is substantial given the volume of work, so plan your time thoughtfully. A timetable for your work may or may not formally be required by your committee, but it is an effective way to manage your time and keep you on track. Create a system whereby you work on parts that contribute to the whole—chapter by chapter or even one part of a chapter at a time. The dissertation journey is essentially about achieving milestones one step at a time.

- As a resourceful doctoral candidate, try to create a dissertation support system that will contribute to your success by providing emotional and academic support. There are many people who have the potential to promote your progress, and the graduate student network is a particularly valuable resource. It is to your advantage to reach out to graduates and other professionals and colleagues who you believe might be helpful to you in this regard.

Organizing Your Work

- Develop your own system to organize and manage the ongoing accumulation of data. This will help you feel more in control and less overwhelmed.
- Right from the beginning, be vigilant in saving information. Losing material, even pieces of it, can be a devastating setback.
- Make use of a journal to capture your thoughts, ideas, and strategies. Recording your thinking means that you will accumulate material that can be revisited and drawn on, and that can form a substantial part of the methodology and analysis chapters of your dissertation. Keeping careful records implies a reflexive approach and provides ideas for future directions of your work as well as an “audit trail,” which is useful for making trustworthiness claims for your study.
- Familiarize yourself with data sources that you will need throughout the process (e.g., library resources, computer databases, and relevant texts).

Guidelines for Academic Writing

- Considering that your audience is primarily the academic community, employ formal, scholarly writing throughout.
- Ensure that format and style adhere to your institution’s and/or program’s requirements.
- Use outlines to plan and present your writing.
- Develop the habit of writing defensively. This approach not only ensures clarity but also helps to ensure that what you are writing does not provoke questions in the minds of the readers.
- Be aware of strategies for avoiding plagiarism, including accidental plagiarism.
- Proofread and edit your work consistently to find and correct your own errors in thought and organization. Read your work aloud to check for syntax, flow, and any unwarranted assumptions and unsupported statements.

Achieving Alignment Throughout Your Dissertation

- Alignment must be addressed at every stage of the dissertation process—from the very beginning when you are seeking to study a specific research problem, right through the very end when you are writing up your study’s conclusions and recommendations . . . and EVERY stage in between!

- It is imperative that you ensure and check for alignment throughout a qualitative dissertation in order to best conduct and write up the research.
- Establishing and maintaining alignment means that your study is tight and that you have taken important steps in ensuring methodological integrity and congruence.
- Demonstrating strong and clear alignment throughout your dissertation is extremely important for the dissertation defense when the methodological integrity of your research is finely scrutinized by your committee members. Be well prepared for questions in this regard!
- Chapter 5 is designed to assist you in developing a clear understanding of the concept of alignment in qualitative research by highlighting and clarifying all of the key elements and concepts that must be strongly and clearly aligned throughout the dissertation.

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