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UNIT 5: METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

In an earlier unit, you have been briefly oriented to the common types of qualitative research. In this chapter we will explore these options further, while keeping in mind that there are other methodological options that you could explore on your own.

Intentions of This Unit

In this unit, learners will be exposed to certain methodological approaches in qualitative research. Additionally, learners will be able to identify the ways in which these approaches align with other parts of a research project. Learners will also have opportunities to participate in interactive exercises to inform their own research projects.

Methodological Approaches

By now you should be aware of the fact that qualitative research is not only diverse, but there is no one correct way of designing or conducting a qualitative study. Even with the methodological approaches discussed below, there are differences of opinions in terms of how these approaches are taken up by researchers. As you go through the material in this chapter, also remember that often researchers combine approaches together. For example, researchers can conduct a narrative case study, or ethnographic case study, and so on. You are being introduced to basic, foundational understanding. But researchers have blurred boundaries between methodologies to fit their qualitative research projects.

Narrative Inquiry

One of the best descriptions of narrative inquiry I have seen is from Jeong–Hee Kim (personal communications, 2015). She describes narrative inquiry below:

> Narrative inquiry is a storytelling methodology in which a story(ies) of a research participant(s) is researched as a way of knowing. Narrative inquiry has been established in different disciplines including psychology, education, law, medicine, sociology, anthropology, and more, opening the door for the synergy of interdisciplinarity. Using narratives and stories as phenomena to understand what it means to be human, narrative inquiry utilizes inter-disciplinary interpretive lenses with diverse approaches and methods, all revolving around the narratives and stories of research participants. Ety-mologically, narrative means narrate (to tell in Latin) and gnārus (to know in Latin). Hence, narrative inquiry is used as a way of knowing that catches the two sides of narrative, telling as well as knowing.

Narrative inquiry offers a lens, a framework to the study of storied lives. One way to think of narrative inquiry is to think of how participants use stories to interpret their experiences with the world, of a certain event, or the world in general. Therefore, the object of study could be a narrative phenomenon, such as the narrative of patriotism after the 9/11 event in the U.S. or the process of tell-ing stories, or the stories that are told, or the ways in which storied lives become a performance, or reveal identities. Additionally, it is necessary to remember that while narrative somehow implies verbal accounts of stories, stories exist in other spaces too, such as pictures, music, videos, dances, and so on.

Thus, in the most basic form, narrative inquiry is a framework that helps researchers explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants' recounting of their experiences. Narrative inquiry offers a way to frame how stories are being told and how stories are being reported and what is being selected as stories to be told and remembered. For Clandinin and Con-nelly (2000), narrative inquiry rests on the assumption that human beings like to tell stories and connect socially through stories, and lead storied lives. Therefore, narrative inquiry would be the study of these stories, storied lives, and how par-ticipants come to understand their own story through retelling and interpreting their experiences.

Other understandings of narrative inquiry would be to analyze anything that can be thought of as narrative material (Lieblich, Tuval–Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Unlike some other researchers, Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) use stories and narratives interchangeably to claim that the stories or narratives as revisited, told, retold, reinterpreted, are part of one's storied life and reveal people's identity.

Types of Narrative Inquiry

While there are many types of narrative inquiry, I discuss six different types of narrative inquiry below. The list is a flexible one, and can be blurred with other types of qualitative methodology and with each other.

Thematic Narratives

These types of narrative inquiry often center around the idea that individuals live storied lives, and by recollecting these stories, they make meaning of their lives. Thus, the stories told are analyzed through an inductive process to identify themes of a storyline and represented as such. For example, see the dissertation works of Leslie Upson (2003) and Leslie Cook (2004).

Biographical Study

These types of study usually involve documenting the narratives of someone else's life. These narratives are usually created through various data sources such as interviews, speeches, documents, writing, pictures, audio, video footage, media records, etc., to create a somewhat comprehensive narrative. For example, see the biography of John F. Kennedy written by Michael O'Brien (2005).

Autoethnography

These are narratives about the self, situated in specific cultural contexts. These narratives reflect on how personal stories are connected to social structures and normative discourses, and the aim often is to document a kind of social history that is otherwise not documented in the way the author is presenting the information. The author is the researcher and the participant simultaneously. Therefore, there is an element of doing the work and observing the self while doing the work. For example, see the works of Laurel Richardson (2013) and Carolyn Ellis (2008).

Life History

These narratives are stories of one's entire life. These are stories that are perhaps not told in history books. Perhaps these stories have a vantage point that requires documentation. While autoethnography or thematic narratives could be around one incident or a few critical incidents, life history narratives span one's entire life. For example, see the work of Denzin (1989).

Oral History

These types of study involve a narrative shared by a person who witnessed a historical event as an insider or an outsider. Conducting oral history research

creates room for narratives that might not be present in any documented spaces. Often what oral histories offer is the ways in which people negotiated a historical experience in their everyday lives. For an example of this kind of narrative, see the work of Gardner and Cunningham (1997).

Arts-Based Narratives

These narratives are produced through some artistic formats. Artistic formats can include poems, ethnodrama, documentary, performances, etc. Given that narratives can exist in various spaces, it is important to think of narratives beyond the traditional format of representation. For more examples on these types of work, see Saldaña (2005a), Cahnmann-Taylor (2006), and James Haywood Rolling, Jr. (2011).

Based on the previous discussion, the following can be seen as some of the shared elements in how people think of narrative inquiry.

- Narrative inquiry offers a variety of theoretical frameworks to understand stories.
- Narratives can be understood as phenomena.
- Stories are the ways in which people make meaning of their lives.
- Stories allow for understanding identities.
- Stories can be a performance.
- Stories can exist in many spaces beyond the text.
- The production of stories, the process of storytelling, and retelling is a focus of narrative inquiry.
- What stories are chosen to be shared is a focus of narrative inquiry.
- How stories are structured is a focus of narrative inquiry.

Designing a Narrative Inquiry Study: Using Our Wiki Example

Recall my study of using wikis in my qualitative research classes. In this example, I will walk you through some basic steps of research design, had I used narrative inquiry as my methodological framework. The basic premise of the design is that I would be interested in how the participants' storied their experiences of using wikis in the class and what can be learned from such storied experiences about creating collaborative projects through the use of wikis in graduate-level qualitative research classes.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how students in a graduate-level qualitative inquiry class author their experiences of learning content while collaborating with their peers on wikis for class projects.

Research Questions

1.   What are the key stories that participants tell when they describe their experiences of using wikis in graduate-level qualitative research classes?
2.   How are such stories being told by the participants? What do the participants choose to highlight in their storytelling?
3.   What might be some ways of understanding the experience of using wikis as a collaborative learning tool in graduate-level qualitative research classes as a result of the participants' storytelling?

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

The research design would be narrative inquiry. I would select at least 5 participants for a 6–8-month-long study. If I have more time, say 2–3 years, I would increase the number of participants to 15–20, anticipating my ability to develop an in-depth inquiry and understanding.

   The data collection methods would incorporate as many ways in which I could get rich, thick stories. I would include interviews, perhaps some elicited conversations, such as asking participants to show me some of their wiki pages and tell me about the construction of those pages. I might ask the participants to show me some key discussion threads where they made collaborative decisions about what to put on the main wiki page, and tell me about the process. I would use all the webpages, discussion threads, class syllabus, instructional emails, and participants' assignments as data sources. I would also keep a researcher journal to document my thoughts and hunches, build on ideas, and explore subjectivities, and use it as another source of data.

Design a Narrative Inquiry Study: Interactive Exercise

Now it is your turn to design a narrative inquiry study. Think about your research topic and how you might use storied experiences to inform your research topic. Complete the following (use your research journal if you need more space):

Research Purpose

Research Questions (write 2–3 questions aligned with the research purpose)

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

Did this design feel natural or forced based on your sensibilities? Elaborate.

Phenomenological Inquiry

You have already been introduced to phenomenology in an earlier unit, so I invite you to revisit that unit in case you need a refresher. It is important to keep in mind that usually phenomenology provides both a theoretical and methodological framework in qualitative research. What that means is that phenomenology offers a theoretical lens to understand people's lived experiences of a phenomenon. Additionally, phenomenology has specific methodological guidelines that can be used when designing and executing a qualitative study. I guess one can say that the theoretical framework of phenomenology comes with strings attached. The strings in this case would be the methodological guidelines.

The central question asked in phenomenology focuses around the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a phenomenon for a person or group of people. Van Maanen (1988, p. 10) states that "phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon for that which makes a some-'thing' what it is." Husserl (see Ricoeur, 1967) discusses phenomenology as a philosophy. Denzin and Lincoln (2002, 2005) in their various Handbook publications cite phenomenology as an inquiry paradigm, an interpretive theory. Moustakas (1994) uses phenomenology as a research methods framework. Polkinghorne (1989) states that phenomenology explores the structures of consciousness in human experiences.

As you can tell that with such a variation in how people understand and utilize phenomenology, it would again fall on the researcher to demonstrate how s/he understands phenomenology, with whom s/he is aligning theoretical and methodological understandings.

One of the ways to understand phenomenology is how van Maanen (1988) explains:

> From a phenomenological point of view, we are less interested in the factual status of particular instances: whether something happened, how often it tends to happen, or how the occurrence of an experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions and events. For example, phenomenology does not ask, "How do these children learn this particular material?" but it asks, "What is the nature or essence of the experience of learning (so that I can now better understand what this learning experience is like for these children)?" (p. 10)

In other words, van Maanen is teaching us that we are not interested directly in exploring the experience of a particular phenomenon per say but rather the essence of that experience, what lies in the core of the experience, the invariant pattern, if you will. There are some key ideas to keep in mind as you think of utilizing phenomenological approaches in your inquiry.

First, you have to identify a phenomenon. The characteristics of the phenomenon can vary, but there has to be something that situates what you want to study as a phenomenon.

Second, ideally, you would need to work with a group of people who have shared the same phenomenological experience. However, as it often happens in

qualitative inquiry, you can also have a phenomenological case study, with few participants (usually 1–5). Again, bear in mind, sample size is not as critical as your ability to develop in-depth theory-driven analysis.

Third, when choosing phenomenology as your methodology, it is important to remember which kind of phenomenology you are aligning with. As demonstrated in an earlier unit, the understanding of phenomenology as a philosophical framework changed once phenomenology was taken up by scholars in the U.S. Therefore, you would need to situate yourself in the broader philosophical discourse of phenomenology as it would have implications for your data collection and data analysis.

Types of Phenomenological Inquiry

While there could be many ways of conducting phenomenological inquiry, we will address three different types of inquiry, transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic. Hermeneutic inquiry and its variant forms of phenomenology is the most commonly used inquiry in qualitative methods.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology is one of the earliest types of phenomenology driven by the works of Husserl (1931) and some of his early assistants after the rise of postpositivism. The focus of transcendental phenomenology is to explore how objects and their meanings are constituted in consciousness. In other words, the focus in transcendental phenomenology is on how knowledge and meaning are constructed, a question of epistemology. Generally, the process of inquiry for this type of phenomenology involves meditative practices where the researcher can retreat within, keep the social discourses of the world outside of conscious awareness, still the mind, focus on what arises from a still space of consciousness, and apply the insights gained to the world when understanding the construction of meaning.

Existential Phenomenology

This kind of phenomenology reflects the evolution of Husserl's earlier thinking through the influence of the works of Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) focusing on meaning making through ontology, one's state of being. The key ideas of this kind of phenomenology are grounded in lived experience, modes of being, and ontology. The researcher inquires how we understand our states of being as it shows up in the world around us through our lived experiences.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Just as existential phenomenology is an evolved understanding of transcendental phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology is an evolved understanding of

transcendental and existential phenomenology. This is not to say that this type of phenomenology is superior to the other ones. It is different from the other ones, and you will be drawn to the one that speaks to you personally, if you choose to work with phenomenology. The basic tenets of this kind of phenomenology are interpretation, textual meaning, dialogue, preunderstanding, and tradition. The seminal scholars for this kind of phenomenology are Heidegger (Heidegger, 1982), Gadamer (1989), and Ricoeur (1976) who moved the understanding of phenomenology from descriptive to interpretive, although the boundaries between the two are blurry.

In this type of phenomenology, language, conversations, one's historical context, understanding, and interacting with cultural elements are where the researcher focuses. The assumption is that meanings do not just appear, emerge, or rise, but that through symbolic apparatus of culture, such as religion, art, literature, language, and history, meaning is mediated. At its onset, this kind of phenomenology was used to look at the interpretation of texts with a phenomenological lens emphasizing on language and communication. However, in recent times hermeneutic phenomenology can be expanded to look at other forms of multimedia data.

Based on the previous discussion, the following can be seen as some of the shared elements in how scholars conceptualize phenomenology.

- Most phenomenologists agree that for a study to be phenomenological there has to be some kind of phenomenon that needs to be studied. How this phenomenon is defined varies.
- Phenomenology can be a theoretical and a methodological framework.
- The focus of the study is usually an identification of an essential experience through varied theoretical and philosophical assumptions.
- Transcendental phenomenology focuses on epistemology and how meaning comes into consciousness.
- Existential phenomenology focuses on the nature of reality and state of being, and is also known as ontological phenomenology.
- Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on the interpretive aspect of meaning making and argues that even in a descriptive account, interpretation is already embedded.

Designing a Phenomenological Study: Using Our Wiki Example

Recall my study of using wikis in my qualitative research classes. In this example, I will walk you through some basic steps of research design, had I used phenomenological inquiry as my methodological framework. The basic premise of the design is that I would be interested in the shared essence(s) of the participants' lived experiences of using wikis in graduate-level qualitative research classes.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how students in graduate-level qualitative research classes explain their shared experiences of using wikis for class projects.

Research Questions

1. How do the participants describe their experiences of using wikis in a graduate-level qualitative research class?
2. What do participants share as challenges when using wikis in a graduate-level qualitative research class?
3. How do participants describe navigating their learning experiences, completing their assignments while using wikis, and any associated challenges?

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

The research design would be a variant of hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry in which I can incorporate multiple types of data. If the duration of the study was 6–8 months, I would include 5–7 participants based on my ability to conduct an in-depth inquiry and deep analysis. If the study were longer, say for 1–2 years, I would increase the number of participants to 10–15 people. The data collection methods would involve multiple interviews per participant (perhaps 3–4), and in-class observations of discussion of collaborative projects for which wikis are used. I might ask participants to show me some of their wiki pages and tell me about the construction of those pages. I might ask the participants to show me some key discussion threads where they made collaborative decisions about what to put on the main wiki page, and tell me about the process. I would use all the webpages, discussion threads, class syllabus, instructional emails, and participants' assignments as data sources. I would also keep a researcher journal to document my thoughts and hunches, build on ideas, and explore subjectivities, and use it as another source of data.

Design a Phenomenological Study: Interactive Exercise

Now it is your turn to design a phenomenological study. Think about your research topic and how you might use lived experiences of a phenomenon to inform your research topic. Complete the following (use your research journal if you need more space):

Research Purpose

Research Questions (write 2–3 questions aligned with the research purpose)

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

Did this design feel natural or forced based on your sensibilities? Elaborate.

Grounded Theory

Similar to other methodological approaches, grounded theory too has been adopted and adapted in various ways by qualitative researchers. Additionally, some people use grounded theory as a methodology, while others use grounded theory methods to inform their work. The former group uses grounded theory as a blueprint for guiding their work and constructs a theory grounded in their data, whereas the latter uses grounded theory methods as data management and analysis tools instead of informing their entire blueprint of research.

Grounded theory has gone through many adoptions and adaptations since its initial conceptualization by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967/2009). Since then Glaser (1992) and Strauss and Corbin (1998) have disagreed and branched off with their own schools of thought. Later, Kathy Charmaz (2002; 2006) introduced and popularized constructivist grounded theory, which created more divisions within the field with researchers using grounded theory methodology in divergent ways to suit their research agendas. I will discuss two broad ways in which the grounded theory differs, which is the classical or objectivist grounded theory, and the second-generation grounded theory that is informed by Charmaz's (2002) work, as constructivist grounded theory.

In the most rudimentary terms, grounded theory methodology attempts to discover theory grounded in the analysis of data collected during qualitative research. This is because several grounded theory scholars believe that sometimes a priori theories are not the best-suited theories to understand participants' conceptualization and meaning making of their experiences. Therefore, they suggest that theories should be developed from data collected after thorough analysis of various data sources that reflect the participants' experiences, actions, and interactions in social situations. The analysis of data collected in grounded theory is inductive, and not deductive, with the assumption that the theory generated will be intimately connected and grounded to the data collected and analyzed. Typically, grounded theory methodologies are suitable approaches when there is little known about a subject so that a thorough investigation can be conducted to generate a theory grounded in data.

Types of Grounded Theory Inquiry

Classical/objectivist grounded theory is ontologically positivist or postpositivist, while constructivist grounded theory is relativist.

Classical/Objectivist Grounded Theory

The goal of the classical/objectivist grounded theory method is to offer a well-developed, well-defended rationale for theory generated and developed during a study. The theories generated from conducting traditional grounded theory work are mid-level theories, which are abstractions of social phenomena and processes

collected during the research. Typically, classical grounded theorists focused on one main concern and its continual resolution, which is also known as the core category. The researcher tries to claim a value neutral, dispassionate role, separate from the research participants, and sees the world, data, as an investigator or outside expert, and does not analyze the possibilities emerging out of the relationship between the researcher and the participants.

While Glaser and Strauss went their separate ways, Glaser did not identify any philosophical influence on grounded theory methods, whereas Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified pragmatism and symbolic interactionism as the influential philosophy for grounded theory. These traditional grounded theorists believe that there is a tangible reality but that it is only imperfectly perceived. Through saturating categories and developing conceptual theories, classical grounded theorists leave open the possibility that a theory can be changed if new information is identified. The conceptual theory generation, ideally, should transfer and be applicable to other situations.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist grounded theory is ontologically relativist, and epistemologically subjectivist. Constructivist grounded theory situates the researcher and the participant in an interpretive exchange where neither enters the research space without the influence of the world, their individual histories, beliefs, assumptions, informing the meanings they make of each other, their experiences outside and within the research space. Unlike classical grounded theory, constructivist grounded theory does not center upon a core category and makes room for multiple truths and perceptions, instead of focusing on one main concern.

Charmaz (2006) advocates for developing "provisionally true" and "verifiable theory of reality" (p. 273) for constructivist grounded theory methodology. This approach is in contrast to the premise of classical grounded theory where the focus is on presenting plausible hypotheses and generating concepts. The assumption is that if done correctly, in a classical grounded theory study, the concept will still be stable even if the people have varied perceptions. Constructivist grounded theorists see data collection and analysis as a shared experience between the participants and the researcher. Constructivist studies examine how participants form meanings and actions, and get as close to the experience as possible. The data analysis conducted by constructivist grounded theorists could be referred to as "data forming" since the researcher is interacting with the participant during the data collection and analysis process. The goal is to uncover values, beliefs, and assumptions of the researcher and the participants than to have specific prescriptive methods.

Charmaz (2006) also advocates for developing theoretical categories and then saturating the categories. Through these processes, Charmaz (2006) suggests conceptualizing a theory through diagramming, sorting through, and

integrating information so that the theory will be grounded in data collected and analyzed. However, Charmaz (2006) does present guidelines for some processes in which researchers can engage when conducting this kind of work. These guidelines include various approaches to coding, verifying understanding, documenting researcher thoughts through memoing, journaling, and annotating notes. She discusses ways in which rich data could be gathered, managed through line-by-line coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding. She advocates for memo writing, where memos are space holders for documenting the researcher's thoughts, negotiations, interpretations, hunches, and so on.

Based on the previous discussion, the following can be seen as some of the shared or essential elements in grounded theory studies:

- Grounded theory can be taken up as a methodology or a set of methodological tools.
- Glaser denied philosophical influence on grounded theory, whereas Strauss emphasized the influence of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism.
- Kathy Charmaz popularized constructivist grounded theory informed by social constructivism and situated grounded theory in the interpretive realm of qualitative research.
- All variations of grounded theory focus on some form of theory development.
- All variations of grounded theory advocate for some form of initial coding and categorization of data.
- Many grounded theorists use memo writing as a way to document process, record thoughts, identify hunches, and write reminders to self.
- Theoretical sampling is a key process of grounded theory research where the researcher expands on the sampling based on new information gained during data collection and analysis.
- Many grounded theory researchers engage in constant comparative analysis so that they can ensure they are working through all parts of the data collected and relating them.
- After initial coding, there exists some form of intermediate coding before theoretical concept(s) are finalized.
- Identifying a core category is relevant to many grounded theory researchers, especially those who are aligned with classical grounded theory.
- All variations of grounded theory advocate some form of inductive construction of abstract categories.

Designing a Constructivist Grounded Theory Study: Using Our Wiki Example

Recall my study of using wikis in my qualitative research classes. In this example, I will walk you through some basic steps of research design, had I used grounded theory as my methodological framework. The basic premise of the design is that

I would be interested in the ways in which participants formed meanings about using wikis in my qualitative research class, with the intent to theorize that meaning-making process.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how students in graduate-level qualitative research classes constructed meanings about their experiences of using wikis integrated into a class project.

Research Questions

1. How do the participants describe their experiences of using wikis in a graduate-level qualitative research class?
2. What ways do the participants construct meaning about their interactions with their peers while conducting their projects using wikis?
3. How do participants describe their meaning making of the content in the class while using wikis for a class project?

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

The research design would involve a maximum variation sampling. This means I would start by selecting a sample size of students who could give me as varied a perspective as I could obtain. So I might select 10 students. But after talking to them, I might realize that I need to talk to some students who were distance education students and some who were single-parent students as their perspectives might shed new light that I did not consider. So the sampling size would increase until I have included as many varying perspectives as I can. This kind of maximum variation in sampling also leads to a saturation point where information from the participants would not offer any more insights, and would be a repeat of what others have said before. I would consider a 4–6-month period of data collection and another 4–6 months for data analysis. Data collection methods could include interviews, elicited interviews, class observation notes, wiki participation, assignments, and information in the wiki discussion threads. I would also keep a researcher journal to document my thoughts and hunches, build on ideas, and explore subjectivities, and use it as another source of data in addition to analytical memos. In an analytical memo, the researcher makes a "note to self" to follow up on hunches, look up literature, or elaborate a thought, interrogate data, develop a conclusion, or connect another part of the data, or anything else that the researcher deems relevant in order to connect with the data while being grounded in the purpose of the research.

Design a Grounded Theory Study: Interactive Exercise

Now it is your turn to design a phenomenological study. Think about your research topic and how you might use lived experiences of a phenomenon to inform your research topic. Complete the following (use your research journal if you need more space):

Research Purpose

Research Questions (write 2–3 questions aligned with the research purpose)

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

Did this design feel natural or forced based on your sensibilities? Elaborate.

Case Study

Case study research is commonly used in qualitative research to answer focused questions with in-depth inquiries. Case studies can be done for relatively short periods of time, ranging from a few weeks, months, to a whole year. Usually case studies investigate issues that are occurring during the time of the research, unlike biographical or historical research. Case studies are also targeted at information-rich sources for in-depth understanding and can also be used to inform policies or to uncover contributing reasons for cause-and-effect relationships.

As you must have guessed by now, there are multiple definitions of case studies research. For example, "Case studies are reports of alternative paradigm inquiries" (Lincoln & Guba, 2002, p. 213), yet the case study "does not implicate any particular approach" (Wolcott, 1992, p. 36). Yin defines case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1994, p. 13).

While Wolcott defines case study as an end-product of research, Merriam asserts that a "qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 21). Merriam adds to her understanding of case studies by stating, "I have concluded that the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27).

Though Merriam advocates for a boundary or identification of the scope of a study, she acknowledges that there is freedom in what might be conceptualized as a case. A case may involve studying a person, program, policy, or any other phenomenon that is intrinsically bounded by the interest of the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, Merriam (1998, p. 13) states that case studies can be responsible for discovering "new relationships, concepts, and understandings" inductively rather than deductively.

Adding to two other researchers' understanding of case studies, Bromley (1986) states that the purpose of a case study is "not to find the 'correct' or 'true' interpretation of the facts, but rather to eliminate erroneous conclusions so that one is left with the best possible, the most compelling, interpretation" (p. 38). Hamel and colleagues (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993) posit that the case study "has proven to be in complete harmony with the three words that characterize any qualitative method: describing, understanding and explaining" (p. 5).

And in my own work (Bhattacharya, 2009b), I have argued that theoretical influences inform how one conceptualizes case study research. From that perspective, I have become critical of the concept of holistic understanding in case study research, or in any form of qualitative research for that matter. This is because no matter how much we try, we are not able to capture the whole. At best, we are documenting what we are able to understand, gather, interpret,

analyze, in the moments of time we have shared with the participant and are invested in reporting the results of our inquiry. Our understanding changes over time, which implies that so does the understanding of the participants of their own lives.

Types of Case Study Inquiries

Based on the intent of case study research, case study research can be understood broadly in three different ways. However, I would caution to not hold the types as stable categorizations that cannot be blurred. One of the most important aspects of case study research is what one considers to be a case. A case is a bounded system and it is up to the researcher to create the boundary of what a case ought to be with justification from existing literature and theoretical perspectives. The three broad types of case studies are single instrumental case study, collective/multiple case study, and intrinsic case study. Case studies can also include numbers in them (as could many other types of qualitative inquiry), as long as they add insight to the case being studied. Numerical information could be a data source and is often integrated in the final representation of results.

Single Instrumental Case Study

This kind of case study focuses on a unique, information-rich situation, concern, or problem and selects a bounded system as a case to study this case. The bounded system in this instance could include one participant, many participants, or an entire organization. The scope of the research is driven by how the researcher operationalizes the bounded system informed by the concern/problem that s/he is interested in investigating. For more on this type of case study research, see Stake (1995).

Collective/Multiple Case Studies

In this type of case study research, the researcher selects an issue or problem to investigate, defines what the bounded system of a case would look like, and selects several cases to explore the issue. Here too, a case could include one person, multiple people, or a whole organization. Selected cases are representative of the issue under investigation and information-rich sources. Reports in this type of inquiries include a report on individual cases and a cross-case report too. This way the researcher is able to provide analytical insights on things that are similar and different between the two cases. For more on this type of case study research, see Yin (2003).

Intrinsic Case Study

This kind of case study is different from the previous types described as the focus here is the case itself, whereas the other types focused on an issue and identified representative bounded systems that were defined as cases. Here a case could be

a student of color in an all–White class, and her experiences in formal and infor-
mal academic spaces or a program which has a high record of success for helping
students of color in middle school in a southern U.S. town engaged in science
and mathematics. For more on this type of case study research, see Stake (1995).

Based on the previous discussion, the following can be seen as some of the
shared elements in how people think of case studies.

- It is important to have a strong understanding and justification for how one
  defines a bounded system to be a case.
- A case could be a person, persons, or a whole organization.
- Theoretical perspectives, and by extension epistemologies, inform how one
  approaches case study work.
- Case studies focus on a specific contemporary issue instead of the work done
  in biographical or historical studies.
- Case study can be a methodology or a form of representation.
- Numerical information can be part of case study research (or other types of
  qualitative inquiry).

Example of a Multiple Case Study

I will use my dissertation study as an example for this section. I was exploring
the experiences of two female graduate students from India in higher educa-
tion in the U.S. in their first year of being in a foreign country. I was interested
in looking at their navigation in various spaces and how being an international
student in a system different to their own revealed things that stood out to the
participants.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how two female Indian graduate students
who have been in the U.S. for no more than 1.0 year negotiate their initial experi-
ences while pursuing their education.

Research Questions

1. What expectations do the two female Indian graduate students retain from
   their Indian upbringing? What expectations do they discard or modify?
   How do female Indian graduate students conceptualize their modification of
   expectations?
2. How do the two female Indian graduate students conceptualize their academic
   experiences (e.g. classroom experiences, relationships with advisors, expecta-
   tions for performance, understanding of their role as graduate assistants, and
   interaction with other students and people of diverse backgrounds, etc.)?

Research Design

I conducted informal conversations, semistructured open-ended in-depth inter-views, photo- and object-elicited conversations, and participant observations. I also kept a researcher journal during the 8-month-long study.

Data Analysis

Generally speaking, data analysis in case studies are inductive in nature where the researcher examines raw data sources, chunks information from those raw data sources, groups information that is similar in meaning, and then looks for com-monalities across and within these groups to identify broad patterns or themes. We will discuss this process in detail in a later unit.

Researchers sometimes use the constant comparative method for analyzing information in case studies. Merriam (1998) states, "The constant comparative

TABLE 5.1 Sample Cross-Case Comparison

Spaces	*Neerada*	*Yamini*
Formal academia	Respected advisor even when she did not feel supported. Practiced acts of resistance and accommodation strategically.	Supported by advisor. Did not connect with non-Indian professors beyond classroom requirements.
Career fairs and networking	No comparable experience.	Became comfortable with forced social conversations toward the end of the program after feeling alienated. Marginalized by other NRIs due to her lack of experience and time in the U.S.
Informal academia	Was not as successful in developing a community of support, although made efforts toward the end to build bridges. She was informed that there was a racial divide in the department.	Developed a community of support with mostly international and some domestic White students. Perceived cultural alienation from some White students in the department. Certain conversations enhanced her sense of Indian-ness.
Hickory Towers	Participated in community activities only to find that the levels of expectation were beyond her means to meet. Accepted marginalization	Did not feel the need to participate in that community. Emphasized that being Indian did not mean that they would be an automatic community.

Spaces	Neerada	Yamini
	even at the cost of loneliness. Different expectations about being an extension of college life from India.	Marginal membership to which she was indifferent. Became preferential to more traditional Indian food, clothes, and entertainment.
Alternate communities of support	Found the same alternate community as Yamini and mentioned that she thought that she could really be herself in this community without the gazes she perceived existed in Hickory Towers.	Used an alternate group of female Indian friends as a community of support who lived in on-campus graduate student apartments.
Family visit/ memories of India	Family memories and conversations became a way for Neerada to stay grounded in her experiences in India.	Family visit reflected gendered and class-based expectations. Yamini desired her independence at the cost of her familiar privileges.
Nonresident Indian (NRI) in the U.S.	Experienced the need to become more traditional and religious than she was in India. Disliked distorted cultural practices.	Yamini grappled with this issue when she was forced to think of her NRI status by the recruiters. From previous exposure Yamini experienced the need to emulate NRI life of compromised privileges.

method involves comparing one segment of data with another to determine similarities and differences. Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. This dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to seek patterns in the data" (p. 18). However, it is not necessary that everyone takes up this approach to analyzing data.

I looked at how the participants' experiences differed based on the spaces in which the experiences occurred. I presented a cross-comparison chart to demonstrate analytic insights from the study.

Design a Case Study: Interactive Exercise

Now it is your turn to design a case study. Think about your research topic and how you might use information-rich cases to inform your research topic. Complete the following (use your research journal if you need more space):

Research Purpose

Research Questions (write 2–3 questions aligned with the research purpose)

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

Did this design feel natural or forced based on your sensibilities? Elaborate.

Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of culture grounded historically in anthropology but currently has been taken up in various fields. However, culture is not that easy of a term to define as we have discussed in an earlier section. Goodenough (1973) frames culture as something human beings learn together, reflected in the form of beliefs, values, rituals, customs, recipes, rules, public values, and systems of customs. Culture then can be something that is taught to and learned by the members who belong to the group. With this understanding of culture, culture can be broadly thought of as a nation and narrowly thought of as being fans of a football team. Preissle and Grant (2004) tell us the following:

> Classical model of ethnography was developed primarily by anthropologists to document ways of life around the world presumed to be changing rapidly under the pressures of colonization and Westernization (Boas, 1940; Malinowski, 1922). Researchers took a visible role in a community or culture for an extended period of time and wrote a contextualized account attempting to portray the culture from the perspectives of its participants. (p. 164)

Ethnography can also indicate methodological procedures as well as a form of representation of data. This is similar to case study where case study could also be a methodology and a form of representation. Additionally, like grounded theory, people often use ethnographic methods for their studies without actually doing an ethnography as many scholars might not have access, time, or resources to conduct an ethnography.

Wolcott (1995) explains ethnography as "a picture of the 'way of life' of some identifiable group of people" (p. 188). It is a way to paint a picture of the world in which the participants live and learn and perform culture. Spradley (1979) describes conducting ethnography as a cultural experience for the researcher, as the researcher has to immerse herself in the culture that she wishes to study. Therefore, the researcher is "embedded in and ultimately concerned with cultural description" (Wolcott, 1980, p. 58). This means that conducting an ethnographic study has to be done with the focus being on deep understanding of human behavior grounded in some cultural context. This kind of work requires "a specialized form of fieldwork, in which culture is a central concept, where deep engagement over time with a culture is expected, and where a central goal is the presentation of an insider's view of that culture" (Preissle & Grant, 2004, p. 165).

Therefore, ethnography is an interpretive description that the researcher provides in order to present the participants' understanding of their culture, to whatever extent that is possible. It would be inaccurate to claim that such a description or interpretation is value neutral and does not reflect the researcher's subjectivities. Like any other qualitative methodology, ethnography can be

informed by various theoretical frameworks. Thus, a qualitative researcher can conduct ethnography using an interpretive theory, such as symbolic interactionism (Geertz, 1973; Lamb, 2000), or critical theory (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Madison, 2005), or postmodernism, or postmodern feminism (Visweswaran, 1994; Wolf, 1992).

This is also a good time to discuss insider/outsider research. In the past, Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz studied groups to whom they were cultural outsiders. There were cautions of not getting so close to the culture one studies where the person goes native and becomes more of a cultural insider than an outsider. However, this argument has been debated by scholars of color across the world. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori scholar, demonstrated clearly when cultural outsiders from a dominant group chose to study a culture about which they had no real understanding and could not understand from their subjective positions that they had done damage and produced oppressive, incorrect, and dehumanizing accounts of cultures they had studied (Smith, 1999/2012). Thus, many communities prefer insiders to conduct research about the communities instead of outsiders producing accounts that lead to further oppression. There are several examples of insiders conducting research in their own communities dating back to the early 19th century with the works of W.E.B. Dubois (1899) who studied his own Black community in Philadelphia. Zora Neale Hurston (1935) conducted anthropological studies in Black communities, and Kamala Visweswaran (1994) conducted ethnographic work in India as a member of the community that she studied.

Ethnographers usually collect data for at least a year and a half to claim deep, rich understanding of a culture. There are ethnographers who have spent at least 10 years in the field to collect data. Field, in this case, does not mean the place where grass grows. Field refers to the research site or sites within which an ethnographer can engage with a certain culture. Sample size is not relevant for ethnography, as this is a study of culture. Therefore, what is relevant is time spent within the cultural context that is being studied.

One of the characteristics of ethnography that is key is that the group or culture being studied should have been together or intact for a long period of time so that cultural values are shared by members and so that an outsider can study these values and talk to the members and understand the ways in which the participants experience and describe their membership in the group.

You need to become familiar with emic and etic perspectives in ethnography. Emic perspectives refer to the perspectives of cultural insiders, and etic refers to the perspectives of cultural outsiders. The more a researcher can obtain, understand, and internalize an emic perspective, the more the researcher will be able to describe cultural experiences from the participants' perspectives. However, an etic perspective allows the researcher to add insights from an outsider that might not be possible from an insider position. Even when a researcher is a cultural insider, the researcher still shifts between being an insider and outsider because the researcher position requires public documentation of something that is shared

only between the group members. The researcher position implies a gaze on a group of people, which automatically puts the researcher in an outsider position. Thus, qualitative researchers often outline how their positions in the research influenced data collection, analysis, and interpretation, in addition to ethical cross-roads they might have encountered.

Types of Ethnographic Research

As with other methodologies presented thus far, there are many ways to conduct an ethnography and it is not possible to list them all in this book. I am presenting an abbreviated list of the types of ethnographies and their associated descriptions.

Realist Ethnography

This is the approach of ethnographies that early researchers used which is mostly informed through an interpretive perspective. Therefore, the purpose of these types of ethnographies was to gain a descriptive understanding of a culture to which the researcher was an outsider. These types of ethnographies are those where the researcher attempted to remain value neutral and wrote in third person with the assumption that there was an object to be observed (in this case, people and their cultural behaviors), and with the right process, these accounts should be objective accounts, something that any researcher could observe and document should they choose to do such a thing. The ethnographer's subjectivities were not discussed as if the ethnographer was the man behind the curtain offering facts for consumption. The ethnographer interviews the participants and presents their words in direct quotes and offers the ultimate interpretation of the quotes, as the voice of authority. For more on realist ethnographies, see the work of van Maanen (1988).

Critical Ethnography

This kind of ethnography is driven by the assumption that our society is divided hierarchically, and deep ethnographic research can interrogate the various ways inequities in our society are sustained and promoted. Inequities can be viewed through different lenses such as race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, national origin, sexuality, disability, socioeconomic status, language, and others as well as the intersectionality of these. The axes of social difference—disability/ableism, gender/sexism, age/ageism, sexuality/heterosexism, race/racism, and the intersec-tionalities of oppression, power, and privilege could also be a way to understand how inequities function in people's lived experiences in certain cultural groups. Thus, a critical ethnography would provide descriptive and interpretive accounts of how such inequities create certain lived experiences for a group of people. The

researchers who conduct critical ethnographies do not claim to be value neutral or assume that what they provide as their account is objective. They value the relationship built with the participant and put themselves under the same ethnographic gaze as the one under which the participants are placed in such studies. For more on critical ethnographies, see the works of Carspecken and Apple (1992) and D. Soyini Madison (2005).

Virtual Ethnography

This type of ethnography is also known as online ethnography, or netnography. Simply put, researchers who conduct virtual ethnography are attempting to study the culture of certain online communities. These communities could exist in discussion boards, chatrooms, virtual environments, or in certain websites where users interact with each other. Researchers could use many ethnographic methods such as interviewing, using technologies such as Skype, Google Hangout, and FaceTime. Some researchers also use synchronized chat to conduct interviews; however, in such interviews, information about nonverbal communication is not captured well because even on Skype or Google Hangout, the researcher is limited in what she can observe within the frame of the screen. Another issue associated with virtual ethnography is the question of how the researcher would obtain multiple sources of information from a participant, if all she knows is someone's chatroom ID. Thus, depending on one's theoretical and methodological framework, issues of verifiability could be compromised. In my own work (2013), while guiding students to conduct virtual ethnographies, I suggested that students ask questions of the participants that are relevant to the participants' experiences in the online spaces only and not about spaces where the researcher does not have any access. Additionally, I recommended that one's understanding of truth needs to be situated, and at any rate, qualitative researchers are not always in a position to claim knowledge of absolute truth. Thus, working in this space means asking questions about cultural understandings which can be inquired through the information present in the online communities that are being studied. For more on virtual ethnographies, see the works of Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2012) and Hine (2000).

Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography is a form of ethnography that is conducted in various digital spaces. In other words, the understanding of culture and cultural contexts are derived from the "field" which consists of digital sources of information, such as text, video or images, and social media, that depict some form of social relations between groups, within groups, between nations, within nations, or whatever way the researcher conceptualizes the scope of the study. A digital ethnographer might be interested in exploring the cultural beliefs of a subgroup in Facebook, or a

breast cancer support group in a discussion forum, or look at the cultural narratives formed based around women of color winning beauty pageants in the U.S. The researcher can determine what would comprise the various field sites while conducting digital ethnography.

When a traditional ethnographer goes into the field, she takes with her some recording device to document interviews and observations. A digital ethnographer uses a different set of tools such as screen-capture software, archiving tools for web-based information, servers for storage of large files, blogs for reflections and interactions with participants where relevant, and software to help manage the volume of content. Thus, the biggest difference between traditional and digital ethnography is where the two inquiries are conducted. For more on digital ethnography, see the works of Underberg and Zorn (2013) and Horst and Miller (2012).

Visual Ethnography

Visual ethnography refers to the practice of conducting ethnographic research which is strongly driven by photographs, videos, and other visual materials to obtain cultural understandings. Ethnographic studies involve the researcher being "there" in the field, bearing witness to the society or culture studied. Visual ethnography is still a form of ethnography, i.e., bearing witness to the society or culture studied, but the investigation is strongly focused on cultural objects, artifacts that are already prominent visual representations with their own meanings for the cultural insiders. Like any other form of ethnography, visual ethnography can also be realist, interpretive, critical, or even deconstructive. The theoretical alignment will drive the cultural meanings made and representations put forward as findings of a visual ethnographic study. Visual ethnographies do not exclude other ethnographic methods such as interviews or observations, but have a strong focus on visual methods, collection of visual data, and analysis of visual artifacts that are meaningful to the culture studied. For more on visual ethnography, see the works of Sarah Pink (2001a, 2001b), Gillian Rose (2001/2012), Howard Becker (2002), Marcus Banks (2001), and Nicholas Mirzoeff (2002/2012).

Based on the previous discussion, the following can be seen as some of the shared elements in how people think of ethnographies.

- Ethnographies involve understanding a culture, bearing witness to a selected social group.
- Culture need not be limited to people of different ethnic backgrounds as many social groups have their own cultures.
- Ethnographies imply a prolonged duration in the field extending well over a year.
- Many people use ethnographic methods without engaging in a full ethnography.

- There are various theoretical, epistemic, and ontological drives that influence the type of inquiry conducted and the ways in which data interpretation occurs in ethnographic research.
- Ethnographic research can be conducted through realist, interpretive, critical, and deconstructive theoretical approaches.
- There are moves to incorporate the digital landscape and tools available in the digital landscape into the cannon of ethnography.
- Visual ethnographies are more than incorporating visual elements in an ethnography. It is the ethnographic analysis of cultural artifacts that are visual in addition to the ethnographic analysis of visual sources of data.

Considerations for Ethnography

If you choose to do an ethnographic study, you have to ask yourself the following questions:

- Can you gain entry to the culture you want to study?
- Are you an insider or outsider to the culture? How will you negotiate your role in the culture?
- Are you approaching your data collection process guided by your theoretical framework?
- Have you considered the time frame of this research and what you need to do after you leave the field?
- Have you considered whether you would need to have access to a key informant for the culture in which you plan to immerse yourself?
- Have you investigated the basic cultural protocols so that, even as an outsider when you first start the study, you do not break protocols in a way that costs your membership in the culture?

Often researchers don't have the **time** required to conduct a full-blown ethnography. In those instances, they remain in the field for 4–6 months and claim that they have conducted **an interpretive study using ethnographic methods.** Conducting a study for a shorter period of time can still allow for an in-depth understanding, but not the kind of in-depth cultural understanding that comes from a prolonged engagement.

Example of a Mini Virtual Ethnography Study

I have introduced students to virtual ethnography by using a virtual multiuser 3-D environment called Second Life. We collect data from Second Life, a three-dimensional, multiuser, online, object-based, virtual environment where users from all over the world log in and create their own cultural experiences. I called

it mini virtual ethnography because the period of engagement in the culture was for only 4 months. Analysis of data is only preliminary and not a comprehensive attempt.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand cultural attachments of users in certain groups in Second Life.

Research Questions

1. What are the participants' experiences of being part of a cultural group in Second Life?
2. How do participants describe their attachments to their cultural group in Second Life?
3. What inspires participants to remain a member in their cultural group in Second Life?

Research Design

The researcher studied members who belonged to a cultural group called International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE). ISTE had an island in Second Life to complement their offline presence. They conduct several chats, conferences, and networking opportunities among educators who are interested in technology integration. The researcher stayed in the environment for 4 months, conducted several interviews over text and voice, verified understanding with the participants, conducted participant observations, took photographs of the cultural site to conduct visual analysis via screenshots, and collected relevant cultural artifacts from the cultural site.

Data Analysis Process for a Mini Virtual Ethnography

Data analysis was inductive, and therefore similar in nature to what was described as the data analysis process for case study, except in ethnography the focus is not on a case but on the culture. Therefore, several ethnographers code, categorize, and identify cultural themes that are evident across and within all data sources. Below is an example of an outline of the preliminary analysis of a mini ethnographic study of the culture of ISTE in Second Life.

The cultural themes were identified after analyzing interview transcripts, observations, snapshots of various cultural events, space, people, web pages, and other relevant archived documents. The Roman numbered bolded statements are cultural themes. The lettered bullet points represent categories. The numerical

listing of words and phrases are some examples of codes, although not an exhaustive list of codes identified in the study.

I.   Assisting newbies in becoming accustomed to Second Life is a focus of ISTE Island.

   A.   Welcoming and accommodating

      1.   Anything I can help with, just ask
      2.   Let me help you a bit
      3.   Let me offer you friendship

   B.   Advice given to newbies

      1.   Do not trust people asking for money
      2.   Be careful of information you share
      3.   People more prone to interact if not new looking

II. Informing newbies about Second Life is a purpose of the culture on ISTE Island.

   A.   Description of Second Life

      1.   Global society
      2.   Business structure similar to real life
      3.   Place for expression

   B.   Economic structure in Second Life

      1.   Goods and services
      2.   Currency and foreign exchange
      3.   Individual ventures and businesses

   C.   Reasons for participating in Second Life

      1.   Technology is incredible
      2.   Networking and exploring

The above was an extremely abbreviated description of ethnography. For more details in using Second Life as a space for virtual ethnography, you can read my chapter on this topic (Bhattacharya, 2013).

Design an Ethnography: Interactive Exercise

Now it is your turn to design an ethnography. Think about your research topic and how you might use cultural experiences to inform your research topic. Complete the following (use your research journal if you need more space):

Research Purpose

Research Questions (write 2–3 questions aligned with the research purpose)

Research Design (sample selection, duration of study, and data collection methods)

Did this design feel natural or forced based on your sensibilities? Elaborate.

Golden Nuggets: Interactive Exercise

Reflecting on what you have been presented in this unit, consider which methodological approach would be most appropriate for your research interest. In order to help you, I have prompted you with some questions. Some of these questions have been presented to you before. In this unit, you can reflect on them again based on your sharper understanding of methodological approaches. If your answers are similar to before, then you can crystallize your ideas further. If your answers are different from what you said before, then you have some reflection to do.

1. What is the purpose of your study? Are you trying to understand, interrogate, or deconstruct?

2. Which one of the methodological approaches presented here do you think is appropriate for your study? What do you think you will be able to gain using this approach?

3. In what ways are you thinking that your research purpose, theoretical framework, and methodology are aligned?

4. Do you see yourself combining any of these approaches? If so, what aspects of the different approaches can you see combining? What will you be able to do if you combine approaches or elements of these approaches?

5. What do you need to know more in order to sharpen your understanding of your research (design, methodology, theoretical framework, something else)?