

SECOND EDITION

SARAH J. TRACY

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

COLLECTING EVIDENCE, CRAFTING ANALYSIS,
COMMUNICATING IMPACT



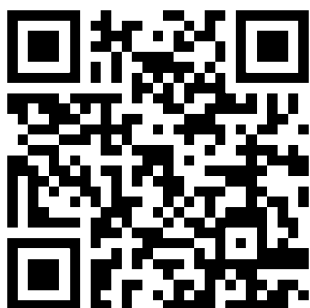
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QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

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SARAH J. TRACY

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COMMUNICATING IMPACT**

Second Edition

WILEY Blackwell

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*I dedicate this book to my past students, research participants, mentors,
and loved ones, who have taught me that anything worth doing
well is worth doing badly in the beginning.*

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Preface

Is this book for me?

This book is an all-inclusive treatment that leads readers through a qualitative research project including research design, data collection, analysis, theorizing, writing, and research disengagement. This book introduces relevant issues as they typically emerge in a qualitative research project. For example, consider ethics or the choice to use visuals or arts-based research. Those new to research must first understand these issues when conceptualizing a project, and then again as they conduct research and analysis, and consider them again when they are creating an ultimate representation and leaving the field. I provide a chronological discussion of relevant issues, which makes this book especially valuable for people to review (and return to) as they journey through a project. My approach contrasts with resources where information about certain theories, methods, or topics are each siloed into their own single chapter. Readers of this book will feel confident to jump into qualitative research straight away.

One of my ongoing aims is to provide clear explanation of qualitative analysis and theorizing in commonsense terms, understandable both to newcomers and to those well versed in qualitative research. Although students have a wealth of available pedagogical resources on methodological philosophies, research design, data collection, and writing, those new to research still struggle with finding appropriate instruction of what to do *in between* the time they collect data and the time they craft it into a polished representation. This book provides step-by-step instruction along with timely examples, backstage stories, visual images, and discussion. It also clarifies how the phronetic

iterative approach in this book compares with other popular analysis approaches (e.g. grounded theory). In addition, it describes seven specific types of qualitative analysis and offers a new discussion of claim-making and theory building.

The book is designed to be accessible to advanced undergraduate students while providing enough detail, references, and illustrations to make it valuable for doctoral students and advanced scholars. Undergraduate students tend to appreciate that I share my own joys and frustrations – marked as they are by twists and turns, celebrations and disappointments – as a method to make the research process poignant, interesting, real, and occasionally humorous. Graduate students have told me that they return to this book repeatedly as they write their theses and dissertations; and faculty have said they keep it on their bookshelves for ongoing reference. And, although this book is designed primarily for an academic audience, practitioners wishing to engage in qualitative research to solve organizational and societal dilemmas will also find good advice within these pages.

This book is appropriate for a variety of disciplines and classes and can be adapted for one-semester/quarter and to two-semester/quarter classes. The book is useful for college courses that appear under names such as research methods, qualitative research methods, ethnography, ethnographic methods, critical research methods, interpretive research, grounded approaches to research, naturalistic inquiry, autoethnography, performance studies, narrative research methods, and field methods. Examples and illustrations reach beyond my home field of human communication to

numerous other disciplines, such as health, education, management, sociology, social work, justice studies, and ethnic and gender studies.

Based upon feedback from reviewers, colleagues, and students, the second edition provides a larger variety of color images (especially picturing the analysis process) and additional qualitative exercises/activities that can be easily incorporated into class sessions. Throughout the book, additional material connects qualitative research to professional, and not just academic, atmospheres (something that may be especially appreciated by undergraduates). Furthermore, the second edition has much more material related to arts-based research, virtual and online textual analyses, and post-qualitative conversations.

In response to requests for greater conceptual clarity, in this edition I separated out theories that are commonly used with qualitative research (e.g. symbolic interactionism, sensemaking, structuration – which are now in Chapter 2) from qualitative methodological territories (e.g. grounded theory, phenomenology, case study – which are now in Chapter 3). Furthermore, in line with the goal that this book's chronological order match that of a typical research project, I have switched the ordering of Chapters 4 and 5 so that IRB, ethics, and proposal writing comes before exploring the scene. Finally, I have added scores of updated examples and references.

A summary of the chapters, as well as notations about new features in this second edition, are as follows:

- Chapter 1 introduces a phronetic iterative approach to qualitative methods and the importance of self-reflexivity, context, and thick description. It also provides tips for choosing a topic and devising guiding research questions. New features include:
 - differentiating qualitative from quantitative research earlier on in the book
 - describing the role of qualitative research in the workplace, in the creative arts, in social justice, in the media, and in a variety of interdisciplinary academic environments
 - a section related to working collaboratively with a partner or team
 - an exercise on interviewing another student
- Chapter 2 overviews the abductive logic of iterative qualitative research, introduces key terminology, provides a sampling of theoretical approaches that commonly use qualitative methods, and concludes with historical matters and current conversations. New features include:
 - an exercise of practicing fieldwork in a public place
 - incorporating new materialism, post-qualitative methodologies, ethical concerns about who gets to study whom, big data, and the quantified self
 - a discussion about how theory works in research
- Chapter 3 discusses four primary research paradigms and how qualitative research is situated in each. The chapter also reviews seven approaches of qualitative research, including: case study, grounded theory, ethnography and ethnography of communication, phenomenology, participatory action research, narrative inquiry and autoethnography, and creative, performative, and arts-based research. New features include:
 - incorporating post-qualitative research and new materialism into the post-modern paradigm
 - new sections on case study, phenomenology, and arts-based research
- Chapter 4 focuses on research design. It introduces various types of data collection and how to develop a sampling plan. Furthermore, it provides an explanation of the importance of ethics and human subjects review and a step-by-step guide for writing a research proposal. New features include:
 - an expanded and earlier discussion of sampling
 - explaining my use of “participant-witnessing” rather than “participant-observation” to refer to fieldwork
 - a new section on the value of textual analysis and cultural studies
 - a new section on the value of visual and arts-based materials
 - material on recruiting and engaging in interviews via online labor pools
 - two additional pedagogical exercises: 1) research questions; 2) conceptual cocktail party

- Chapter 5 provides confessional tales about and systematic tips for navigating access to conduct qualitative research. These include keeping a contact log, creating an access proposal, organizing a participant table, and early exploration methods like diaries, maps, and narrative tours. New features include:
 - a confessional tale and material regarding gaining access to elite populations
 - a section on navigating access to a virtual site and ethical sensitivities of textual harvesting
- Chapter 6 gives insight on different field roles and standpoints, visual and virtual aspects of fieldwork, how to write fieldnotes, methods for focusing on data collection, and how to manage various ethical dilemmas in the field. New features include:
 - visual, virtual, and online aspects of fieldwork
 - a fieldnote writing exercise
 - problematizing the idea that data is static using theories from new materialism
- Chapter 7 offers the nuts and bolts of planning and designing good interviews, including different types, structures and stances. Then, it turns to how to write and order interview questions and dialogue, providing updated examples along the way. New features include:
 - a section and text box on visual, embodied, and elicitation interviewing approaches such as mobile interviewing, photovoice, and think-aloud method
 - a section on the question, “how many interviews are enough”
 - new question types that relate to phenomenology and narrative approaches
 - an expanded discussion on replacing “why” questions with “how” questions
- Chapter 8 focuses on conducting an actual interview or focus group session. It discusses developing rapport, ethical engagement, logistics, transcription, and advantages and disadvantages of various interview formats – face-to-face, mediated, one-on-one, or group. It closes with common interviewing challenges. New features include:
 - an exercise on facilitating a focus group
 - examples and a visual that depict arts-based research in focus groups
 - how to deal with inauthenticity or problematic viewpoints in interviews using dialogic interviewing
- Chapter 9 details how researchers can analyze their qualitative research materials using a phronetic iterative analysis approach. It then provides step-by-step best practices for transforming a heap of data into a story or set of arguments endowed with theoretical, aesthetic, and practical significance. Along the way, the chapter differentiates types of coding, how to create a codebook, and various synthesizing activities. New features include:
 - explaining how a phronetic iterative approach compares with other analysis approaches
 - a section that clarifies the different labels people use to describe analysis, such as: codes, themes, categories, chunks
 - responding to post-qualitative concerns regarding coding
 - a coding start-list that provides topics and questions to ask when beginning coding
 - additional color images to show coding processes at work
- Chapter 10 provides advanced data analysis approaches that are especially appropriate for graduate level instruction. It discusses logistical tools such as visual data displays and computer-aided qualitative analysis, and seven different analysis approaches: exemplars, typologies, narrative, metaphor, and discourse tracing. The chapter closes with using deconstructionism as a theoretical frame for doing arts-based research. New features include:
 - clarifying when you would choose which type of analysis approach
 - explaining the importance of interpretation and logical creativity for analysis
 - a section on narrative analysis (coupled with the dramatisitic pentad)
 - showing how analysis can unfold directly from the theory of deconstructionism
- Chapter 11 overviews qualitative quality based upon my “eight big tent criteria model” for qualitative research. The chapter opens by discussing traditional quantitative measures of research quality (e.g. objectivity,

statistical generalizability, and reliability) and explains how these are inappropriate benchmarks for qualitative methods. It then discusses how researchers across paradigms can create high quality qualitative research that is interesting, sincere, rigorous, ethical, and credible. New features include:

- discussing how the “eight big tent criteria model” for qualitative quality has been used and extended in teaching and research since its original publication in 2010
- incorporating the latest discussions and examples of quality from multiple disciplines and topic areas
- Chapter 12 provides a discussion of theorizing and writing qualitative inquiry. In doing so, it illustrates different types of qualitative tales, the various ways findings might be organized, and issues to consider when writing the main parts of a qualitative essay. New features include:
 - a section called “Theorizing, brainstorming, explaining” that discusses how to move from analysis, to claim-making, to writing
 - three additional pedagogical activities: 1) found poem; 2) theorizing via abductive reasoning, 3) writing and rewriting
 - an expanded section on poetic methods
- Chapter 13 overviews drafting, polishing, and publishing. It provides the philosophical framework of writing as a form of inquiry and reviews how to format qualitative data. The chapter also provides insight regarding good qualitative journals, revision, overcoming common writing errors, and how to write a lot! New features include:
 - an exercise that illustrates how verb tense affects understanding
 - a section on persuasive qualitative writing
 - updated examples and writing tips
- Chapter 14 comes full circle, overviewing logistical issues for leaving the scene and showing how researchers can frame and deliver their qualitative work so that it impacts the world. In doing so, it reviews alternatives to the academic essay, via public scholarship options like performances, films, online presence, grants, consulting, and media relations. New features include:

- updated examples and images of films, YouTube channels, websites, performances, and private sector ethnography / consulting
- an expanded discussion on the importance of public scholarship

Along the way, I include recurring text boxes. Activities and assignments are in boxes labeled “Exercise.” Examples and narratives are called “Consider This.” Practical recommendations are listed in “Tips and Tools.” Finally, data excerpts or experiences are offered in “Researcher’s Notepad.” Some of these boxes are written in the words of other scholars and students – in which they talk about their own experiences or activities that have worked in their own qualitative classrooms. The boxes break up the text and encourage reader engagement.

Furthermore, I intermittently include sections called “Following, Forgetting, and Improvising.” Practicing any interpretive art requires tagging back and forth between rules and improvisational practice. I suggest ways in which researchers might fruitfully play with qualitative best practices, or in some cases forget them altogether. Like in all dialectics, the paradox of “following, then forgetting” qualitative best practices is not something that can be solved or resolved. There’s no easy way out; but there are better ways of navigating than others. This book can serve as a guide.

Finally, an accompanying website with teaching manual materials is available with the book. Materials include:

- 1 Powerpoint slides to accompany each chapter
- 2 Sample syllabi for both undergraduate and graduate courses
- 3 A test bank, containing questions for each chapter, including answers
- 4 Lesson plan outlines for each chapter
- 5 Additional activities and worksheets
- 6 Master list of key terms and definitions

These materials will help those who are new to teaching qualitative research methods to be up and running in no time. For experienced instructors, they serve as a supplement and launching pad for new pedagogical options.

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CHAPTER 1



Developing contextual research that matters

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In summary

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the words, “research methods?”

Many people never think explicitly about this question, and if they do, they think that research methods are difficult to learn and painstaking to conduct. However, you might be surprised to discover that you engage in research every day – and these methods not only provide important resources for understanding the world, but are actually a common and enjoyable way to spend time.

We ask questions, listen to stories, watch others, participate in meetings, check our text messages, analyze visual images, gossip, and engage in dialogue. All of these are qualitative research activities. Through talking to others we learn about their quirks, interests, pet peeves, and sense of humor.

We learn about their culture. We think about these experiences, make patterns of meanings, and absorb the scene.

We simultaneously share our own understandings in conversations, text messages, and through social media. In telling these stories, we call out the most important players and evaluate their behavior. We do this to pass the time, interact, and have fun. But we also do it to understand the world and our place within it. We make sense through our talk, and our meaning-making helps us know what to expect in the future. At a basic level, we all engage in qualitative research daily. The focused study of research methods takes these everyday actions one step further: to a systematic analysis that may lead to better understandings – not only for us, but for others.

Overview and introduction

This book guides readers step by step through the qualitative methods process – research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and creating a representation that can be shared with others, whether that is a class paper, a work project, a publication, a performance, a service portfolio, or a social media story. This book offers guidance, whether you are a student preparing to write a paper, an employee wishing to use qualitative research at work, a social justice activist completing a service project, a critical performance artist passionate about interrogating power relations, a rhetorician interested in complementing textual analysis, or a quantitative researcher hoping to augment statistical findings.

Chapter 1 opens by introducing three central concepts that can jumpstart a qualitative project: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description. Next, I overview the unique, praxis-based, contextual approach of the book, the ways that qualitative research differs from quantitative research and how qualitative research is used in a variety of settings, jobs, and disciplinary fields. Finally, I discuss the first steps in conducting a research project, including choosing a context and developing research questions.

Three core qualitative concepts: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description

Self-reflexivity

Self-reflexivity refers to people’s careful consideration of the ways in which their past experiences, points of view, and roles impact their interactions with, and interpretations of, any particular interaction or context. Let’s examine this definition in more detail.

Every researcher has a point of view, an opinion, or a way of seeing the world. Some people call this “baggage”; I prefer to call it wisdom. Rather than deny our way of seeing

and being in the world, qualitative researchers acknowledge, and even celebrate it. A person's demographic information provides the basic ingredients. For example, I am female, white, heterosexual, middle-aged, partnered through marriage, and an aunt. My work roles have included professor, public relations coordinator, and cruise ship activities director. I practice yoga, I love to cook in my crockpot, and I drive a black Model 3 Tesla named JJetson. I believe that success rewards virtuous action and discipline, that life is easiest when I do what I say I'm going to do, and that good research provides opportunities for transformation.

This background shapes my approach toward various topics and research in general. Likewise, your own background, values, and beliefs fundamentally shape the way you approach and conduct research. The qualitative researcher in mind and body literally serves as a research instrument – absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world through observation, participation, and interviewing. These are the analytical resources of our own “subjectivity.” They shape the way we approach research, analysis, and knowledge. Being self-reflexive means that we are thoughtful about this background and its influence. As Carter and Little (2007) suggest, “a reflexive researcher *actively* adopts a theory of knowledge. A less reflexive researcher *implicitly* adopts a theory of knowledge” (p. 1319) (italics added for emphasis). This means we think about our guiding assumptions, and consistently reconsider their value and consequence. Of course, our bodies and minds also live in a context.

Context

Qualitative research is about immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make sense of it – whether at a company meeting, in a community festival, or during an interview. Qualitative researchers purposefully examine and make note of small cues in order to decide how to behave, as well as to make sense of the context and build larger knowledge claims about the bigger picture. Paying close attention is the key to success.

Clifford Geertz, sometimes referred to as the father of interpretive anthropology, focused on examining the field's rich specificity. As Geertz (1973) famously put it:

Believing that ... man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

Ethnographers construct meaning through immersion in a context. This is in direct contrast to some scientific research – say, an experimental laboratory study – where goals include *isolating* variables and *controlling* circumstances, so that findings can be replicated.

Indeed, qualitative researchers believe that the empirical and theoretical resources needed to comprehend a particular idea, or to predict its future trajectory, are themselves interwoven with, and throughout, the context. Social theories are based on the ever-changing, biased, and contextualized social conditions of their production. So, for example, we can glean emergent theories of social justice from rich contextual stories about poverty and eviction (e.g. Desmond, 2016).

Thick description

Directly related to context is the idea of **thick description**, which refers to the way researchers immerse themselves in a culture, investigate the particular circumstances present in that scene, and only then move toward grander statements and

theories. Meaning cannot be divorced from this thick contextual description. For instance, without a context, a person's eye winking could mean any number of things, including that the person is flirting, is keeping a secret, has an uncontrollable facial twitch, or is imitating someone else's twitch (Geertz, 1973). The meaning of the wink comes precisely from the complex specificity and the circumstances that inform interpretations of intention; "The aim is to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics" (p. 28).

By describing the background and context of action, researchers can decipher a twitch and tell it apart from a wink and from a parody of a wink – and they may interpret the meaning(s) of all these gestures and help predict whether we are likely to see the behavior again. This process of interpretation is dependent upon the scene's particulars. This being the case, context provides a central role for qualitative research, while *a priori* (predetermined) theory takes a back seat.

How qualitative research is distinct from quantitative research

The phrase **qualitative methods** is an umbrella concept that covers interviews (group or one-on-one), participant observation (in person or online), and textual analysis (paper or electronic). Such methods can include research in the field, a focus-group room, an office, or a classroom. Qualitative methods by definition need not include long-term immersion in a culture or require a holistic examination of *all* social practices. Indeed, some qualitative studies cover the course of a single day (e.g. Willer et al., 2018) and others come in the form of open-ended qualitative survey approaches (Lutgen-Sandvik, Riforgiate, & Fletcher, 2011). Furthermore, researchers can engage in qualitative methods over a long time or for an extremely short duration.

One of the most common ways in which qualitative research is understood is through comparison with key features of **quantitative methods**. Quantitative research transforms data – including conversations, actions, media stories, facial twitches, or any other social or physical activity – into numbers. Quantitative methodologies employ measurement and statistics to develop mathematical models and predictions.

Communication scholar Brittany Peterson asked her students at Ohio University to draw what they envisioned when considering quantitative versus qualitative research. When students thought of quantitative research, they drew computers, calculators, lone researchers, surveys, measuring sticks, numbers, and equations. They wrote down words like "truth" and "significance" and used little color. In contrast, when the students envisioned qualitative research, their drawings depicted multi-color light-bulbs, stories, audio recorders, the wild outdoors, wavy lines/multiple connections, and several people talking or interacting together. People clearly envision quantitative and qualitative research in different ways.

A quantitative researcher, for instance, may aggregate survey answers to measure how often respondents engage in a certain activity, or how much they prefer a certain product. Interaction may be observed in the laboratory, or it may be collected physiologically (via a stethoscope or blood samples) and examined in terms of how much of a hormone is detected in their saliva (e.g. Floyd, Pauley, & Hesse, 2010).

Although quantitative researchers may use field data – for example, by studying the drinking patterns of patrons in bars or coffee shops – in contrast to a qualitative thick description of the scene, quantitative research is usually driven by questions of scale like, “How much?” and “How often?” Counting and transforming data into numbers are much less frequent activities among qualitative researchers.

Another key difference between qualitative and quantitative methods is the role each one gives to the researcher. In quantitative research, the research instrument is separate and distinctly different from the researcher controlling the instrument. For instance, the nurse is distinct from the thermometer, the chemist watches but is separate from the flask where emissions are catalyzed into fuel, and the quantitative social scientist is detached from a survey that measures participant attitudes. In qualitative methods, the researcher *is* the instrument. Observations are registered *through* the researcher’s mind and body. In such circumstances, self-reflexivity about one’s goals, interests, proclivities, and biases is especially important.

Finally – and this is something we will cover in greater detail in Chapters 12 and 13 – the representation of the methodology, findings, and discussions of qualitative research differs from that of quantitative research (Corley, 2012). Statistical studies usually separate out the description of the research instrument (say, a survey) from a report on the findings (often represented in charts and graphs). In qualitative research, the description of the research methods often includes the journey of access, and flows into the stories, observations, and interactions collected. The findings often include creative data displays and must go beyond simply reporting results to crafting an engaging story that will reach out and grab the reader’s attention. Qualitative articles have a much shorter opening literature review and a longer discussion about theoretical extensions. Finally, qualitative researchers do not reserve the writing for the end of the project, but instead they write all the way through the process of collecting data, analyzing, reflecting, and inquiring.

Some researchers choose one method over the other. However, it is not absolutely necessary to confine oneself to either qualitative or quantitative research. Some of the strongest research programs are built upon multiple methods of data collection. For instance, to examine emerging patterns of social media use at work and their influences on status hierarchies, Kim (2018) used in-depth individual interviews, online and offline observations, and quantitative online content analysis.

I encourage you to ask two key questions when choosing a research methodology and approach. First, “What types of methods are best suited for the goals of your research project?” Many people consider methods to be akin to tools. Just like a hammer is a better tool than a screwdriver for banging a nail into a wall, qualitative methodology is better than quantitative methodology for richly describing a scene, or for understanding the stories people use to narrate their lives. But sometimes two tools can do a job well. For instance, an artist could use chalk, markers, paint, or clay. The choice depends in part on the goal of the piece and in part on the artist’s preferred medium.

So, a second key question to ask is: “Which methodologies are you most equipped to use, or most attracted to?” For some people, qualitative research and ethnography are not simply value-free tools, but instead serve to fundamentally constitute a democratic and humane form of thinking and being (Berry, 2011). Case in point, when the ethnography division in the National Communication Association (NCA) was being proposed in 1999, a senior social scientist critiqued the idea by saying, “No division has ever been based on a method.” One of the advocates and proponents for the new division, Arthur Bochner, replied by intoning one of Rose’s (1990) main edicts:

“Ethnography isn’t a method. It’s a way of life” (Bochner, 2014). After some chuckles and lots of affirming smiles, a vote was taken and NCA’s ethnography division was born (and Art went on to become NCA president in 2008). Soon after, the mythic band “The Ethnogs” (The Ethnogs, the Femnogs, & Rip Tupp, 2011) wrote the song, “Ethnography is a way of life” (available on “Gory Bateson’s” YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1NBO1NXjM8>). Clearly, for many, qualitative research is more than just a means to an end.

In sum, choosing which methodology to use depends on the research goals as well as on your personal proclivities, preferences, and talents. If multiple methods are equally equipped for the job, you might hark back to the drawings by Brittany Peterson’s students. Do you find yourself more attracted to wavy lines, color, and chaotic connections, or are you more comfortable with rulers, equations, and a right answer? If you are like me, you may be more attracted to qualitative research methods, but still see the value of occasionally practicing or collaborating with those who are expert in quantitative research.

A phronetic approach: doing qualitative research that matters

This book takes a praxis-based and “phronetic” approach to research (Tracy, 2007). This approach suggests that qualitative data can be systematically gathered, organized, interpreted, analyzed, and communicated so as to address pressing concerns and prompt change. I suggest that researchers begin their research process by identifying a particular issue, problem, or dilemma in the world and then proceed by interpreting and analyzing so that the resulting project sheds light on the issue and/or opens a path for possible social transformation. Doing use-inspired, practical research (Barge & Craig, 2009) is especially well suited for service learning, socially embedded research, public intellectualism, funded projects, and community partnerships.

What is **phronetic research**? The ancient Greek noun *phronēsis* is generally translated as “prudence” or “practical wisdom” (Aristotle, 2004). *Phronēsis* is concerned with contextual knowledge that is interactively constructed, action-oriented, and imbued with certain values (Cairns & Śliwa, 2008). Research conducted under its guidance serves

to clarify and deliberate about the problems and risks we face and to outline how things may be done differently, in full knowledge that we cannot find ultimate answers to these questions or even a single version of what the questions are. (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 140)

This approach prioritizes practice in context, assumes that perception always is related to a specific (self-reflexive) subject position, and that the social and historical roots of an issue precede individual motivations and actions (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). It also assumes that communication produces identity for the researchers as well as for those researched, and that it generates knowledge that benefits some more than others. Qualitative methods are especially suited for examining phronetic questions about morality and values (e.g. see Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). Social action is always changing; therefore, contextual explanations and situated meanings are integral to ongoing sensemaking.

Strengths of qualitative research

Through a phronetic approach that focuses on self-reflexivity, context, and thick description, qualitative research has a number of advantages as a research method. First, many researchers – especially young scholars who do not have the luxury of comfy offices or high-tech laboratories – are all too happy to escape their shared apartments and cramped graduate school offices and venture into the field. This may be why so many excellent ethnographies are conducted by people under the age of 30. As Goffman (1989) said about naturalistic field research: “You’re going to be an ass ... And that’s one reason why you have to be young to do fieldwork. It’s harder to be an ass when you are old” (p. 128). Indeed, early career fieldwork is punctuated with moments where researchers feel snubbed, humiliated, or offended (Tracy, 2014). Although these incidents may feel uncomfortable or dent the ego, they provided opportunities to access tacit and unarticulated data, connect with research participants, and engage in vulnerable conversations.

Second, qualitative research is excellent for studying contexts you are curious about but do not have a “valid” reason for entering. Third, in addition to personal interest or disciplined voyeurism, qualitative research provides insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments. Fourth, qualitative research can uncover salient issues that can later be studied using more structured methods. Indeed, field research may lead to close and trusting relationships that encourage a level of disclosure unparalleled in self-reports or snapshot examinations of a scene. Such work has the potential to provide insight about marginalized, stereotyped, or unknown populations – a peek into regularly guarded worlds, and an opportunity to tell a story that few know about. Such was the case with Wolfe and Blithe’s (2015) research with employees in Nevada’s legal brothels.

Fifth, qualitative research is especially well suited for accessing tacit, taken-for-granted, intuitive understandings of a culture. Rather than merely *asking about* what people *say* they do, researching in context provides an opportunity to see and hear what people *actually do*. Rather than relying on participants’ espoused values, we come to understand how participants live out these values daily. The more researchers become immersed in the scene, the more they can make **second-order interpretations** – meaning that researchers construct explanations for the participants’ explanations.

Sixth, and perhaps most importantly, good qualitative research helps people to understand the world, their culture, and its institutions. Qualitative methodology can provide knowledge that targets societal issues, questions, or problems and therefore serves humankind. In summary, qualitative research:

- is rich and holistic;
- offers more than a snapshot – provides understanding of a sustained process;
- focuses on lived experience, placed in its context;
- honors participants’ local meanings;
- can help explain, illuminate, or reinterpret quantitative data;
- interprets participant viewpoints and stories;
- preserves the chronological flow, documenting which events lead to which consequences, and explains *why* this chronology may have occurred;
- celebrates how research representations (reports, articles, performances) constitute reality and affect the questions we can ask and what we can know;
- illustrates how a multitude of interpretations are possible, but how some are more theoretically compelling, morally significant, or practically important than others.

In short, qualitative methods are appropriate and helpful for achieving a variety of research goals – either on their own or in a complementary relationship with other research methods.

Qualitative research is useful in a variety of jobs, settings, and disciplinary foci

Qualitative methods are not only valuable for writing class papers and scholarly research articles, but also support staged performances, white papers, grant applications, corporate consulting, social media, and web content. Here, I describe the role of qualitative research in the workplace, in the creative arts, in social justice and change, in the media, and in a variety of interdisciplinary academic environments.

Workplaces commonly use qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. Qualitative research, for example, can help determine how employees are adjusting to an organizational transition, or how customers are using a new product or service. Intel ethnographers, for example, investigated the following strategic question: “Will smartphones take over most of the functions of personal computers?” (Anderson, 2009). Although surveys might provide an overview of buying patterns, visiting people’s homes and observing their actual behaviors are crucial for understanding how people live and for discovering elusive trends that will inform future corporate strategy. Sociologist Sam Ladner (2014), who specializes in the social aspects of technological change and private sector design ethnography, makes the case that qualitative research methods are crucial for prompting empathy with end-users and for noticing when current systems or products are dysfunctional.

Qualitative research is also a daily activity for professionals who conduct interviews. Police officers, social workers, and doctors must ask the right questions, listen thoughtfully, identify the most important information, and then piece it together to solve a crime, create a plan, or proffer a diagnosis. Furthermore, in the process of hiring or getting hired for a job, most people will experience interviewing as a regular part of work. Exercise 1.1 provides interviewing practice while it simultaneously encourages you to get to know others.

Creative artists – whether they are actors, playwrights, or novelists – engage in qualitative research through conducting interviews or living a certain situation themselves. Novelist and filmmaker Ken Kesey was inspired to write the cult classic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) only after working the night shift in an asylum. During filming, actor Jack Nicholson, along with other cast members, stayed in Oregon State Hospital’s psychiatric center, where they regularly spoke with patients and staff, received group therapy, and created personalized sleeping areas (Denham, 2015). This immersive experience spurred emotionally raw and authentic depictions of the oppression experienced in mental institutions. In addition to sweeping the top five Academy Awards for that year, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* severely tarnished the reputation of electroconvulsive (“shock”) therapy and hastened its departure from conventional mental health treatment (Swaine, 2011). This is an example of the way that creative art spurs social change!

Indeed, qualitative research is very useful for anyone interested in change and social justice. You might ask yourself this question: When was the last time you were moved to transform a core belief or way of being in the world? If you are like most people, it takes a while to identify a significant change. For better or worse, most people are quite rigid in their beliefs and habits (Duhigg, 2012). Now consider this question: What prompted you to make that change? Visualizing a certain situation is a key part in persuasion (as anyone who has used Monroe’s Motivated Sequence would know). Dramatic changes are rarely the result of being confronted solely with facts and figures. Instead, they usually are spurred by some type of personal or vivid experience (e.g. a personal health scare may get you to the gym).