PART 1
Qualitative Research Methodology:
Background and Context

Qualitative Research

Research Paradigms

Rigor
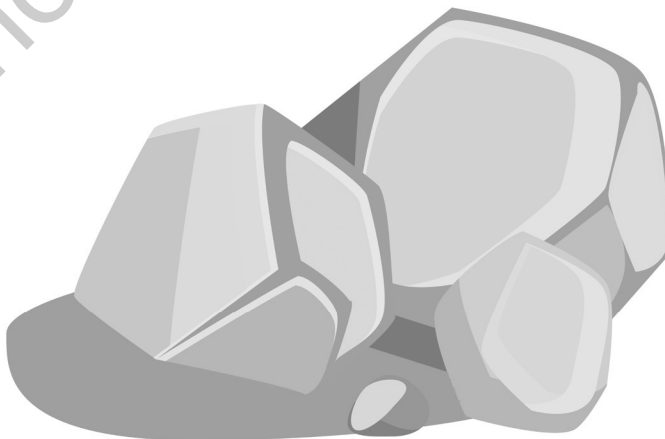
Trustworthiness

Researcher-as-Instrument

Reflexivity

Positionality

Research Ethics

Secondary Research

PhD

Research Implications

EdD

This opening part of the book outlines the key features of qualitative research to set the stage for what is entailed in conducting qualitative research and writing a qualitative dissertation. This is the point of entry for anybody contemplating a qualitative dissertation. Specifically, we draw attention to the essential ways in which qualitative research differs from quantitative research, the evolution and philosophical basis of qualitative research and the different research paradigms, the current landscape of qualitative research, and the role of a qualitative researcher, which encompasses reflexivity and positionality. Concepts central to qualitative research are introduced including rigor, trustworthiness, ethics, and criticality, all of which are integral to conducting the research and which constitute the criteria for evaluating the quality of a qualitative study. Woven into the discussion of each of these central concepts are the associated implications for dissertation research, thereby clarifying expectations and requirements. We then move to discuss differing doctoral programs and the key characteristics that constitute a qualitative dissertation within each of the main program tracks: PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) and EdD (Education Doctorate), which provides an opportunity to address real-world challenges within the education sector. Part 1 logically progresses from broad concepts (qualitative versus quantitative research) to more specific paradigms and methodologies, building foundational knowledge crucial to understanding qualitative research and making this accessible and understandable to readers with various levels of prior knowledge.

1 IN WHAT WAYS DO QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DIFFER, AND WHAT ARE THE DEFINING FEATURES AND PRINCIPLES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Social science research is a systematic process of inquiry that aims to expand our understanding of phenomena, explore relationships, and answer questions that drive knowledge forward. Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies play pivotal roles in advancing knowledge across disciplines. The choice among these methodologies will depend on your study's purpose and research questions, the nature of the phenomenon under study, and the preferred approach to gather and analyze data. Understanding these methodologies and their unique characteristics is fundamental for researchers in terms of (a) aligning their chosen methodology with the goals and objectives of their research, (b) choosing the appropriate research design, (c) guiding the selection of suitable data collection and analysis methods; and (d) correctly applying the fundamental principles of the methodology that is selected to ensure accurate and meaningful interpretation of research findings.

Qualitative research methodology has undergone a rich evolution of thought and acceptance, starting with strong opposition for being, on the surface, less rigorous and standing as "second best" to quantitative inquiry. Although that perspective is no longer predominant today, it is crucial to make a strong case for why a particular methodology has been selected for a research study. Thus, understanding the associated research paradigms as well as the foundational principles of qualitative research is critical to the success of both novice and seasoned researchers. Developing an understanding of the research paradigms provides a deeper grasp and appreciation of the principles of qualitative research and offers insights into the essential ways in which qualitative research differs and departs from quantitative research.

RESEARCH PARADIGMS

All research is based upon a set of philosophical assumptions, sometimes referred to as a researcher's epistemological and ontological beliefs or worldview, or paradigm. Ontology and epistemology are philosophically derived constructs about the nature of reality (ontology) and how we know what we know about reality (epistemology). A paradigm is essentially a set of beliefs that guide all the researcher's choices and decisions regarding what to

study, how it is to be studied, and why. Guba and Lincoln (1994) have developed the idea of "inquiry paradigms" to express the close connections among the concepts of epistemology, ontology, methodology, and methods. Quantitative and qualitative research differ from one another because of the different philosophical thinking they draw upon, which influences the ways in which the research is designed and conducted. This includes the way we think about the types of research problems that are worthy of study, the purpose of the research, the nature of the research questions that are posed, the types of data or information we need to achieve that purpose, the ways in which we collect or gather that data, the way in which data are analyzed and research findings interpreted, and finally how we make judgments regarding the rigor of the research. It is therefore important to understand the basic assumptions and underpinnings of the paradigms that underlie both quantitative and qualitative inquiry.

Quantitative Research Paradigms

Quantitative research is grounded in a *positivist paradigm* and based on a realist ontological position, assuming that reality is observable, measurable, and stable (Schwandt, 2016). Strategies include descriptive research (the collection of data to test hypotheses or answer questions about the current status of the subject of inquiry), correlational studies (the collection of data to determine whether and to what degree a relationship exists between two or more quantifiable variables), causal-comparative research (attempts to determine the cause or reason for existing differences in the behavior or status of groups of individuals), and experimental research (which includes true experiments as well as less rigorous experiments or quasi-experiments). With all of these strategies, at least one independent variable is manipulated, whereas other relevant variables are controlled, and the effect on one or more dependent variables is observed, to achieve reliability and validity. Although there are variations among these strategies, all quantitative studies rely on measuring variables using a numerical system, analyzing measurements using statistical models, and reporting relationships and associations among the studied variables to describe, explain, predict, and control cause–effect phenomena of interest.

It is important to note that debates and critiques of positivism gave rise to a *post-positivist paradigm* within the social sciences, which recognizes that it is not possible to entirely remove the influence of the researcher on the design and outcome of a study and that there is always a subjective element in the conduct of research and the resulting findings. Consequently, from a post-positivist perspective, research should be designed to distinguish *between beliefs* rather than strive to produce *absolute truths*, and so the task of the researcher is to acknowledge and manage their subjectivity as best as possible (Campbell & Russo, 1999). This paradigm is often applied to comparative case studies and traditional grounded theory to conduct qualitative research (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2022).

Mixed Methods Research Paradigm

For the many forms of *pragmatism*, knowledge claims arise out of situations, actions, and consequences rather than from antecedent conditions, as in post-positivism. Pragmatism as an inquiry paradigm is concerned with practical application and workable solutions to research problems (Patton, 2015). Pragmatism centers on the notion that research is contextually based and that both quantitative and qualitative approaches should be employed

to understand the problem. It is argued that researchers should be free to choose the methods and procedures that best meet their needs and purposes, and as such multiple methods of data collection and data analysis are integrated within the research. Pragmatism cuts across quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Qualitative Research Paradigms

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative researchers collect and interpret narrative and visual data *to gain insight into a phenomenon of interest.* Rather than seeking to determine cause and effect or attempting to predict or describe the distribution of an attribute among a population, qualitative researchers seek to understand how people interpret their experiences and how they construct their worlds. The two paradigms that underlie and inform current qualitative research are social constructivism (or interpretivism) and critical theory:

>   ***The social constructivist or interpretivist paradigm*** focuses primarily on understanding and accounting for the meaning inherent in human experience and action from the point of view of the research participants themselves. Research participants are viewed as co-constructors of knowledge, and the research is designed to understand their perceptions and perspectives regarding their lived experiences, which will lead to reconstructed understandings of the complex social world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Schwandt, 2000). The trustworthiness of the reconstructed accounts form the basis of the findings and conclusions of the research. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2014) provide a collection of reflections on the interpretive versus positivist approaches to social science and presents important debates regarding methods and methodology.

>   ***The critical theory paradigm*** advocates for increased awareness of how thinking is socially and historically constructed to challenge the status quo that sustains and perpetuates commonly held assumptions and biases. Critical theory is rooted in emancipatory pedagogy (Freire, 1968/1970), which challenges dominant and hegemonic paradigms about knowledge and research. The core focus is on highlighting social justice issues, questioning systems of power and oppression, and giving "voice" to marginalized or underrepresented individuals or groups. Marginalization refers to systemic inequities including institutional oppression, lack of recognition, and social privilege, all of which sustain disproportionalities. Critical research goes beyond uncovering the interpretation of peoples' understanding of their world, as in constructivism, and places value on raising awareness and addressing research problems due to inequity, oppression, and discrimination (Cilesiz & Greckhamer, 2022). The goal is not only to understand problematic social phenomena but also to challenge dominant narratives and drive equitable social change (Matta, 2022).

There is a great deal of diversity regarding the many research designs that fall under the larger umbrella of qualitative research. Each of the qualitative research designs are based upon a specific *inquiry paradigm* or *worldview*, that is, a basic set of beliefs and assumptions that guide action—in this case, the research process. The paradigm thus becomes the lens through which research is conceived, designed, and executed.

DEFINING FEATURES AND PRINCIPLES
OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

There are a several distinctive characteristics of qualitative research that set it apart from quantitative research:

At its core, the purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deep understanding of a particular problem or phenomenon by exploring the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups within their natural contexts. This is in contrast to quantitative research which hypothesizes relationships among variables and uses statistical methods to form conclusions. Qualitative researchers seek to describe and explain social and cultural phenomena through methods that elicit qualitative, non-numerical data. Qualitative methods generate in-depth narrative information that would be difficult to quantify, such as perceptions, perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. The focus is on producing a "holistic account" of the research problem, and by way of "thick description" (Geertz, 1979) readers are able understand the experiences of the participants and the context from which the findings were derived. This means respecting the complexity of participants' experiences and presenting findings that are true to their voices.

To ensure rigor in qualitative research, we use the term *trustworthiness* and the four criteria within trustworthiness: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. There are multiple strategies a researcher can employ to address each of these criteria. Validity, reliability, and generalizability are quantitative concepts that do not apply to qualitative research. Validity is a quantitative data term because we do not establish validity without statistical analysis. Reliability is associated with quantitative research and numerical data that can be tested with statistical analysis. Quantitative research is based on objective measurements of large random samples, and the goal is to strive for research sample representation and generalizability of the study's findings across broader populations.

Research questions are typically open-ended, and sample selection is purposeful (sometimes referred to as purposive) rather than random (probability sampling) as would be the case with quantitative research. In this way, the qualitative researcher selects a smaller specific group of participants who meet certain predetermined criteria that are relevant to the context of the study. The goal of qualitative research is not to produce "truths" that can be generalized to other people or settings. Rather, the goal is to develop descriptive, context-relevant findings that make it possible for readers to decide whether the study's findings and conclusions can apply to their own settings and communities by way of transferability, which is one of the qualitative trustworthiness criteria.

Design complexity is a defining characteristic because the researcher does not rely on a single data source but rather triangulates multiple different data sources and methods to support and enhance the trustworthiness of the study. The perspectives of all individuals are valued, and gathering multiple perspectives is a significant part of capturing the variety and depth of research participants' experiences. Unlike the quantitative researcher who strives to remain detached and objective, qualitative researchers interact with participants in their natural environment, attempting to make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the plurality

of meanings behind the study's findings. The researcher delves into the exhaustive details of the study and demonstrates thorough documentation, contextual description, and acknowledgment of the complexities influencing the study. This helps remove any doubt of bias, provides clarity around the context of the study, and strengthens the study's credibility.

Design flexibility is a further hallmark of qualitative methodology. Due to the iterative and complex nature of the qualitative research process, including data collection and data analysis, methodological choices can be modified when necessary to explore and address emergent issues or concerns as these arise. This flexibility enables researchers to explore complex phenomena in a more holistic and responsive manner, capturing the nuances and intricacies of human experiences. Whereas qualitative research dives deep into the meanings, contexts, and complexities of human experiences, quantitative research employs statistical rigor to measure, test, and predict phenomena in a standardized, objective, and precise manner.

Because understanding is the primary goal, the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, and data analysis and is typically referred to as *researcher-as-instrument*. The subjective lenses that *both* the researcher and research participants *together* bring to a qualitative study form the context for the findings. The closeness of the researcher to the research participants means that the researcher is expected to be fully transparent about their worldview and positionality because this will significantly shape the research process from design and choice of methods through data analysis and presentation of the study's findings. Unlike quantitative research, where the researcher is expected to remain objective and detached, qualitative researchers acknowledge that their own beliefs, values, and experiences can influence the research process. Qualitative researchers practice reflexivity to unearth any internal biases or power imbalances that exist between themselves and the research participants. Key methodological considerations include rigor, criticality, and transparency as well as adherence to the highest ethical standards throughout the research process.

Qualitative data analysis is nonlinear; it is a multilayered and iterative process whereby the researcher continues developing and examining themes until data saturation is achieved as no new information is emerging. Because there are inherent complexities including social influences and the environmental context, the qualitative study's findings are multilayered. The qualitative researcher sorts through the vast descriptions from the participants, analyzes and interprets the information, and then identifies major themes to discover and explain the deeper meaning of the findings. Valuing the variety of perspectives allows the researcher to remain open to multiple outcomes. A quantitative researcher would either accept or reject the null hypothesis, whereas a qualitative researcher remains open to variety of perspectives, interpretations, and conclusions, thereby creating space for rich descriptive findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

The authors of the most recent *Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* view the field of qualitative research as interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and constantly evolving

(Denzin et al., 2024). Qualitative research is an indispensable methodology for exploring complex phenomena, including pressing issues involving social justice. By understanding the core principles of qualitative inquiry, researchers can effectively design and conduct studies that generate rich, context-specific findings. By embracing the richness of qualitative inquiry and navigating the complexities of research paradigms and designs, qualitative researchers can generate knowledge that contributes meaningfully to our disciplines and to the larger society. The key to conducting a rigorous qualitative research study is to appropriately and meaningfully select a research design by developing some familiarity with the paradigms that underlie each design and the current landscape of qualitative research and then identify a design that will align with your worldview and best inform your study's research problem and purpose.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 2 (critical qualitative research)

- 3 (research rigor)

- 4 (trustworthiness criteria)

- 5 (researcher-as-instrument)

- 6 (researcher positionality)

- 7 (research ethics)

- 33 (qualitative research designs)

- 41 (mixed methods research)

2

HOW HAS THE FIELD OF QUALITATIVE INQUIRY EVOLVED OVER TIME, AND WHAT IS CRITICAL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Over the years qualitative inquiry has passed through several phases or *historical moments*, which overlap or coexist in the present, and so the field of qualitative research continues to evolve and transform itself (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Denzin et al., 2024). Changes in research methods are rapidly evolving, which has given way to changes in research focus and agenda (Bloomberg, 2023; Morse, 2020). As an emergent and fluctuating field of inquiry, qualitative research crosscuts disciplines and subject matters and includes traditions associated with positivism, postpositivism, and postmodernism and poststructuralism among others.

THE CRITICAL RESEARCH AGENDA

In the past three decades, a critical turn has taken place in the social sciences, humanities, and applied fields with scholars challenging the historical assumptions of neutrality in inquiry, asserting that all research is interpretive and fundamentally political (Denzin et al., 2024). The postpositivist approach to inquiry, which had prevailed, was based on a set of beliefs grounded in an objectivist view in which researchers attempted to minimize error and biases in their observations to best represent a reality and enable predictions. A postmodern approach to inquiry refers to a set of beliefs that question modernist assumptions about identity, history, language, art, and culture. With postmodernism came an ideological turn toward multiple realities and socially constructed truths, and research came to be characterized by specific, local, and historical representations with the goal of disrupting conventional methodologies and instead approaches experience and social reality as a collection of unfolding entanglements of forces that support the dominant status quo (St. Pierre, 2021, 2023; Stewart et al., 2021; Wolgemuth et al., 2022). Poststructuralism, with its emphasis on language, forms a subset of postmodernism and developed in reaction to structuralism, which sought to describe the world in terms of systems of centralized logic and formal structures. In the creation and communication of meaning, language is viewed as an integral and key process. Words are seen as providing patterns of meaning and deep structures that exist and operate within a cultural system.

Power and Positionality

Critical research is rooted in the assumption that we live and work within a power-laden context and that it is important to understand the various and complex ways that power

operates to dominate and shape consciousness (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2024). The focus of critical research is on the complexities inherent in power relationships and the social, historical, and ideological forces that serve to constrain knowledge building. Moreover, aligned with the ethics of traditionally underrepresented groups, a critical qualitative stance rejects the notion that one group can "know" and define (or even represent) "others" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2024). It is increasingly argued that research involves issues of power and that traditionally conducted social science research has silenced, marginalized, and oppressed groups in society by making them the passive objects of inquiry. Postmodernism views the world as complex and is skeptical of narratives, viewing these as containing power-laden discourses developed for the maintenance of dominant ideas or the power of individuals, institutions, or theories. In recognition of the socially constructed nature of the world, meaning rather than knowledge is sought because knowledge is seen as constrained by the discourses that were developed to protect powerful interests. Deconstruction of grand narratives is viewed as an important way of removing their power. The first strand of critical research emerged from theoretical orientations with regard to postmodernism and poststructuralism, where the view of qualitative research moved away from grand narratives and became focused on the idea of multiple realities and socially constructed truths. The second strand developed from the social justice movements beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, including the civil rights, women's liberation, and the gay rights movements. As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) explain, the current phase of qualitative research, the "fractured posthumanist present," includes the intellectual agenda (where issues and problems revolve around the implementation of a social justice framework), the advocacy agenda (showing how qualitative work addresses issues of social policy), and the ethical agenda (where research honors minority voices and calls for compassion, community, and social justice).

Oppressive Social Structures

Overall, there is an increasingly greater emphasis across all qualitative designs regarding facilitating social change by taking an active critical stance toward oppressive social structures and processes. The motivation is that qualitative inquiry has the potential to highlight inequities and inequality, barriers and access, poverty and privilege, and the implications of suffering from injustice. Recent trends indicate that qualitative research includes a strong activist and educational agenda, thereby intentionally facilitating transformative and equity-oriented possibilities (Bloomberg, 2023). All of the critical genres—including a variety of feminist theories and methodologies, Indigenous research, critical discourse analysis, critical ethnography, critical race theory, queer and quare theory, transgender theory, cultural studies, critical multiculturalism, critical participatory inquiry, critical gerontology theory, postcolonial and poststructural studies, intersectionality studies, and disability studies—have an activist or social justice component based on a liberationist philosophy, and all are dedicated to disrupting the power structure of knowledge construction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Denzin et al., 2024). Added to these critical genres is the increasingly expanding body of trauma-informed research, which amplifies participant voices and empowers individuals and groups to decide what stories they wish to share (Alessi & Kahn, 2023; Brigden, 2022; Isobel, 2021).

Critical research is rooted in the assumption that we live and work within a power-laden context with a focus on the complexities inherent in power relationships and the social, historical, and ideological forces that serve to constrain knowledge building

(Call-Cummings et al., 2024; Cannella et al., 2015; Chilisa, 2020; Darder, 2019; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kovach 2018, 2021; Sleeter, 2024; Smith, 2021). The critical race theory lens is often used to examine how systemic inequities and racial dynamics shape marginalized students' experiences in education, highlighting slow change, the preservation of inequality, and the silencing of marginalized voices (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998). Critical researchers are wary of notions of absolute truth and dominant ideologies and are concerned with historical inequities produced by rigid views of knowledge or *grand narratives*, with the goal of deconstructing these (Grbich, 2013). The quest is to uncover dominant points of view and ideologies that seem to be disguised as universal truths and to disrupt these to create spaces for resistive knowledge production that challenges the oppressive or privileged status quo. Deconstruction of grand narratives is seen as contributing to radical change or emancipation from oppressive social structures either through sustained critique or direct advocacy and action taken by the researcher in collaboration with research participants. The researcher and "the researched" are not considered separate entities; through interpretation, their emergent constructed meanings become interwoven (Darder, 2019; Grbich, 2013). Levitt et al. (2021) and Macleod et al. (2018) articulate principles and practices that support methodological integrity and ethics with regard to critical qualitative research, providing guidelines for evaluating rigor and quality.

Marginalization and Colonization

Marginalization refers to systemic inequities impacting groups including institutional oppression or *colonization*, lack of recognition, and social privilege, all of which sustain disproportionalities and inequity. In colonized systems, equity is often framed as providing equal access to existing structures, which perpetuate colonial knowledge and practices (Patel, 2016; Smith, 2021). The concept of inclusion emphasizes equal access to environments where diverse populations are welcomed, valued, and empowered to reach their full potential. However, inclusion demands more than equal access, requiring a commitment to addressing historical inequities and critically examining systemic barriers to create safe environments that genuinely reflect the diversity and potential of all (Patel, 2016). Critical race theory and Indigenous perspectives embrace the effects of marginalization by countering it with self-determination (Smith, 2021; Thambinatha & Kinsella, 2021). Indigenous communities, for example, have begun to actively resist hegemonic research and reinvent new research methodologies in an effort to achieve the "decolonization of research methods" and reclaim control over Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Smith, 2021). Thambinatha and Kinsella (2021) provide tangible ways to incorporate decolonial learning into research methodology and proposed four practices that can be used by qualitative researchers working with populations oppressed by colonial legacies: (1) exercising critical reflexivity, (2) reciprocity and respect for self-determination, (3) embracing othered ways of knowing, and (4) embodying a transformative praxis; that is, for those who undertake emancipatory research, the purpose of doing research with oppressed communities stems from an intent to bring to light historically silenced voices and present their experiences in authentic ways. Similarly, Sumida and Martin (2020) promote authenticity through research by affirming Indigenous voices and cultural knowledge. This edited volume includes issues of power, representation, and accountability through exploring decolonizing and decolonial methodological paradigms, honoring Indigenous knowledge systems and calling for interdisciplinary collaboration toward Indigenous self-determination.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

In essence, adopting a critical approach means asking questions about the historical forces that shape societal patterns as well as the fundamental issues and dilemmas of power, positionality, policy, and domination in institutions, including their roles in reproducing and reinforcing inequity and social injustice. It is argued that research itself involves issues of power and positionality and that traditionally conducted social science research has silenced groups in society by making these groups the passive objects of inquiry (Cannella et al., 2015; Canella & Lincoln, 2024; Chilisa, 2020; Darder, 2019; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2024; Patel, 2016; Smith, 2021). The key purpose of research is to address, challenge, educate, and hopefully change problematic social circumstances by promoting liberation, transformation, and social change. Viewing qualitative inquiry through a critical lens indeed forces us to rethink taken-for-granted frameworks, paradigms, methodologies, and politics and advocates for a critical stance that addresses equity, social justice, decolonization, intersectionality, and the politics of research (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Darder, 2019; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Denzin et al., 2024; Smith, 2021; Thambinatha & Kinsella, 2021).

Your decision to conduct critical qualitative research should be guided by your topic, research problem, and worldview. Critical research is an appropriate design when a researcher is seeking to conduct a study with the purpose of promoting equity, inclusion, transformation, and social change for marginalized individuals and groups by uncovering and highlighting oppressive and hegemonic points of view and ideologies. Critical research typically includes a powerful and empowering advocacy and educational component. To appropriately and meaningfully position your proposed study, this would also entail a deep understanding of critical theory and the critical genres and methodologies that fall under the larger umbrella of critical research. To achieve Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, your research will also need to address the highest ethical standards that are required when working with vulnerable populations, including those that are historically underserved economically or educationally.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 6 (researcher positionality)
- 7 (research ethics)
- 33 (qualitative research designs)
- 34 (research design choice)
- 46 (Institutional Review Board approval)
- 67(analysis and qualitative research designs)
- 68 (researcher credibility)
- 69 (cultural integrity)
- 90 (transparency and criticality)
- 102 (dissertation evaluation)

3 WHAT IS IMPLIED BY *RIGOR* IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CONDUCT A *RIGOROUS* QUALITATIVE STUDY?

Due to the interpretative and contextually bound nature of qualitative studies, the application of standards of rigor and adherence to systematic processes that have been well documented are essential. The goal of rigor in qualitative research is to minimize the risk of bias and maximize the accuracy and credibility of research findings. Rigor necessitates thoughtful and deliberate planning, diligent and ongoing application of researcher reflexivity, and transparent communication between the researcher and the audience regarding the study and its reported findings. Rigor throughout the research process including the study's findings is achieved when each element of study's methodology, including data collection and data analysis, is systematic and transparent by way of methodical, ethical, and accurate reporting (Johnson et al., 2020). A study's rigor is often critiqued when others perceive it is lacking. Changes in research methods and focus are rapidly evolving, and as Morse (2020) points out, these changes are being driven by an agenda that claims to increase standards of rigor.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS: RESEARCH DESIGN, TRUSTWORTHINESS, ETHICS, AND ALIGNMENT

Determining the relevant and appropriate design and methods for your qualitative study provides the foundation for your research. Next, you will need to consider trustworthiness, ethics, and alignment to build on that design foundation. These considerations will result in a high-quality, rigorous final product. We need to know that a research study is rigorous to know that its findings can be trusted and that the study itself provides credible evidence for understanding events or phenomena both in terms of taking action and designing future research. This applies to both qualitative and quantitative research. Let's take a look at each of the components that contribute to rigorous qualitative research:

Research Design

The philosophical paradigm that guides a research study is fundamental for understanding the principles that underpin both the design and conduct of the research and for the evaluation of its rigor, hence its quality. The two paradigms that inform qualitative research, namely, interpretivism or social constructivism and critical theory, place emphasis on seeking understanding of the meanings of human actions and experiences and on generating accounts of meaning from the viewpoints of the research participants.

The interpretive paradigm focuses primarily on understanding and accounting for the meaning inherent in human experience and action. The critical paradigm advocates becoming aware of how our thinking is socially and historically constructed and how contexts limit our actions to challenge the status quo and commonly held assumptions and biases. O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) have written extensively on the necessity for congruence among ontology, epistemology, and methodology in terms of how this informs the choice of research design and methods for data collection and data analysis in qualitative research. Qualitative research designs are informed by a researcher's worldview, which is tied to a specific research paradigm.

Trustworthiness

Quantitative research is best evaluated against its own aims: accurate and objective measurement and valuing the generalizability of findings to a broader population beyond the study's context. Hence the reliability and validity of instruments used is central to evaluating the accuracy and objectivity of the measurements. Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), parallel internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. One major concern in qualitative research, as in quantitative research, has to do with the confidence that researchers and consumers of research studies can place in the procedures used in the data gathering, the data collected, its analysis and interpretation, and the related findings and conclusions. As such, establishing trustworthiness is essential. The term *trustworthiness* refers to an overarching concept used in qualitative research to convey the procedures researchers employ to ensure the quality and rigor of a study. Criteria for determining the trustworthiness of qualitative research were introduced by Guba and Lincoln in the early 1980s, when they replaced quantitative terminology for achieving rigor (reliability, validity, and generalizability) with credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, and numerous strategies for achieving trustworthiness were also introduced. This landmark contribution to the field of qualitative inquiry remains in use today and forms an underpinning of rigorous research practices.

Ethics

In any research study, ethical issues relating to protection of the participants are of vital concern. As researchers, we are morally bound to conduct our research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to all of those involved in the study. The central issue with respect to protecting research participants is the ways in which information is treated and disseminated, and the conduct of research with human participants, including how issues of confidentiality and anonymity are addressed, as laid out in the Belmont Report (1979) of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. Ethical considerations must begin right at the beginning stages of a study. Because ethical issues can arise in all phases of the research process (including data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of findings) it must also be evident that the *researcher-as-instrument* continues to address ethical issues throughout the research process and has acknowledged their subjectivity and adopted a reflexive stance. It is also critical that the researcher remain attentive throughout their study to the

researcher–participant relationship and address their positionality, which is determined by roles, status, and cultural and social norms.

Alignment

The researcher must demonstrate clear evidence that they have addressed alignment at every step of the research process so that all of the key pieces of the larger whole are congruent and fit with each other. Qualitative research is recursive in that it builds on and depends upon all of its component parts and so that the study itself is a grounded and cohesive whole rather than the sum of its isolated parts. The researcher creates the link among research problem, purpose, and an appropriate qualitative research design, which affords a research study methodological congruence (Richards, 2020). Making sure that a researcher has achieved alignment among the many interrelated components of their qualitative study, including methods used, integration of the theoretical framework with data analysis, and the ways in which the conclusions are based on the research findings means that the study is tight in terms of methodological integrity (Bloomberg, 2023). Evidence of alignment is essential both at a philosophical and a practical level and is an indication of a study of worth and quality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Central to exemplary qualitative research is whether the research participants' subjective meanings, actions, and social contexts, as understood by them, are illuminated. Thus, central to the rigor of qualitative research is whether participants' perspectives have been authentically represented in the research process, and the interpretations made from the findings are coherent, in the sense that they fit the data and social context from which they were derived. The importance of the power relations between the researcher and the researched, and the need for transparency (openness and honesty) of data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings highlight the extent to which criteria for rigor profoundly interact with standards for ethics in qualitative research. Because rigor is about being transparent, evaluating the quality of qualitative research includes criteria that are concerned with good practice in the conduct of the research (methodological rigor) as well as criteria related to the trustworthiness of interpretations made (interpretive rigor). Transparency is thus an inherent hallmark of rigorous qualitative inquiry and is key to ensuring quality.

Along with transparency, the why of your research contributes to rigor. In other words, the purpose of the research and the knowledge and/or action brought about by the research also serves to support your study's rigor, and this must be made clear. The relationship between theory and practice, research and action, is fundamental to all fields of applied social science. Research findings and knowledge should therefore be useful in advancing science, practice, and policy. The ways in which research is designed, conducted, and disseminated to achieve the dual goals of rigor and relevance are critical. These challenges are particularly relevant in the areas of applied research where there is a distinct responsibility for researchers to engage with the "real world" as they advance both science and practice (Van de Ven, 2007). Van de Ven has based his argument on the writing of Boyer (1996), who outlined four dimensions of engaged scholarship that contribute to rigor—discovery, teaching, application, and integration—which ultimately places the focus of research on "achieving more humane ends" (p. 20).

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 4 (trustworthiness criteria)
- 6 (researcher positionality)
- 7 (research ethics)
- 29 (alignment)
- 31 (methodological congruence)
- 32 (trustworthiness strategies)
- 33 (qualitative research designs)
- 34 (research design choice)
- 46 (Institutional Review Board approval)
- 56 (qualitative data analysis)
- 83 (theoretical and conceptual framework function)
- 100 (dissertation defense)
- 102 (dissertation evaluation)

4 WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA OF *TRUSTWORTHINESS* OR *LEGITIMATION* REGARDING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, AND HOW DO THESE ISSUES COMPARE WITH QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH STANDARDS?

In quantitative research, the standards that are most frequently used for high-quality and convincing research are validity and reliability. If research is valid, it is considered to clearly reflect the phenomena, situation, or materials being described. If work is reliable, then two researchers studying the same phenomenon, situation, or materials will arrive at comparable or similar conclusions. Criteria for evaluating qualitative research differ from those used in quantitative research in that the focus is on how well the researcher has provided evidence that their descriptions and analysis authentically represent the reality of the phenomena, experiences, or persons being studied.

Qualitative research is characterized by an ongoing discourse regarding the appropriate and acceptable use of terminology. Current thinking has led to the development of alternative terminology to better reflect the nature and distinctiveness of qualitative research. Whereas some qualitative researchers who adopt a more positivist approach still feel comfortable borrowing terminology from quantitative research and refer to "validation strategies" (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Maxwell, 2013), in the field of qualitative research, there is a growing tendency to reject the use of traditional terms such as *validity* and *reliability*. Guba (1981), Guba and Lincoln (1982), and Lincoln and Guba (1985) were the first scholars to make the argument for the importance of *trustworthiness* in qualitative research as a means for reassuring the reader that a study was of significance and value, explaining that validity and reliability are quantitative concepts that do not apply to qualitative research. Validity is in essence a quantitative standard because we do not establish validity without statistical analysis. Similarly, reliability is a standard associated with quantitative research and numerical data that can only be tested with a statistical analysis. Instead of these quantitative standards, there are four criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability (Bloomberg, 2023; Frey, 2018; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018; Stahl & King, 2020). These four criteria, taken together, provide a consistent reference point for researchers when addressing potential limitations, and this helps address arguments about rigor, which has been an ongoing critique of qualitative research.

FOUR TRUSTWORTHINESS CRITERIA

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative research means that other researchers and scholars will trust your analysis and interpretation, thereby supporting the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of your study's findings:

Credibility refers to whether the research participants' perceptions match with the researcher's portrayal of them. It is essentially the readers' confidence in the truth of the findings and requires the study to be believable to readers and also approved by those providing the information in the study. In other words, has the researcher accurately represented what the participants think and say? This criterion parallels the criterion of internal validity in quantitative research.

Confirmability is concerned with establishing that the findings and interpretations are clearly derived from the data. In your dissertation, you will be expected to be able to describe in detail your analytic approach and show that you are able to demonstrate how you got from your data to your conclusions. Confirmability corresponds to the notion of objectivity in quantitative research but is based on the premise that qualitative researchers do not strive to achieve objectivity. Confirmability of qualitative data is assured when data are checked and re-checked throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that the study's findings would likely be repeatable by others. The implication is that the study's findings should be shown to be the result of the research rather than an outcome of the subjectivity of the researcher. The goal is to acknowledge and explore the ways that your biases and prejudices affect the way you interpret your data.

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of data over time. This trustworthiness criterion also addresses whether the data are providing adequate responses to each of the study's research questions. This criterion parallels the quantitative notion of reliability, although it is not assessed through statistical procedures. Dependability of the qualitative data is demonstrated through assurances that the findings were established despite any changes within the research setting or participants during data collection. Rigorous data collection techniques and procedures can assure dependability.

Transferability refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied to other similar contexts. Transferability is often described as corresponding to the notion of external validity in quantitative research. In quantitative research, generalization rests on statistical representativeness; that is, the extent to which the study's results relate to the broader population. The goal of qualitative research is not to produce "truths" that can be generalized to other people or settings but rather to develop descriptive context-relevant findings that can be applicable to broader contexts. Unlike the previous three trustworthiness criteria, transferability cannot be guaranteed by the researcher because it is up to the reader to make that determination. It is the role of the researcher to provide thick descriptions of the research participants, the research site, and the study's findings so the reader can assess the transferability of the study's findings. The idea of transferability is that it does not have to be universal for all circumstances or situations for the

research to be considered trustworthy. This is a significant departure from the notion of generalizability in quantitative research, which is a standard that is strictly required and mandated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Unlike quantitative researchers, who apply statistical methods for establishing validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure and enhance the trustworthiness of their findings. The approaches that qualitative researchers can employ to address the trustworthiness criteria fall within three broad areas: (a) reflexivity (includes acknowledging biases and ongoing critical reflection), (b) triangulation (builds into your research process a systematic cross-checking of information and conclusions through the use of procedures and/or sources to determine where research findings converge, or *triangulate*), and (c) participant verification (confirming your study's findings with research participants).

In your dissertation you will be required to articulate your understanding and evidence of each of the four primary criteria to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. You will also be required to demonstrate what actual and actionable strategies or techniques you employed to address and mitigate each of the trustworthiness criteria at various stages of the research process, which is expanded upon in Nugget #32. Ongoing and intentional transparency is key to ensuring trustworthiness. Trustworthiness means that the community of researchers and scholars will trust your analysis and interpretation of what others said and did in the field, thereby supporting the credibility and dependability of your research and the transferability of your findings. Toward this end, as a qualitative researcher you will need to ensure that you are thinking more deeply about the potential impact of all the choices you make regarding your study's design, including identification, justification, and limitations for all methodological choices and what might be your underlying (explicit and implicit) biases and assumptions related to your positionality (Bloomberg, 2023; Stahl & King, 2020). In conclusion, whereas the pursuit of trustworthiness in qualitative research is a methodological imperative, it is also a moral imperative for research that respects, represents, and reverberates in any form of social science research. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability collectively create trustworthiness to elevate our work as researchers by valuing and authentically representing every voice and story (Bloomberg, 2023). This ensures that your audience, whether researchers, practitioners, or policymakers, can trust the findings of your study and consider these as valuable contributions to the field.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 3 (research rigor)

- 5 (researcher-as-instrument)

- 6 (researcher positionality)
- 32 (trustworthiness strategies)
- 66 (interpreting findings)
- 68 (researcher credibility)
- 69 (cultural integrity)
- 100 (dissertation defense)
- 102 (dissertation evaluation)

5 HOW DO I BEST UNDERSTAND THE CONCEPT OF *RESEARCHER-AS-INSTRUMENT* AND THE CENTRALITY OF REFLEXIVITY ON THE PART OF THE RESEARCHER?

Qualitative research involves exploring a phenomenon in depth for a comprehensive understanding. So instead of focusing on collecting numerical data, a qualitative researcher aims to describe and analyze their research participants' experiences, attitudes, and perspectives. The concept of researcher–as–instrument centers on the researcher's subjectivity through their identity and experiences because these connect to the research context. The researcher is an instrument in collecting data, and beyond the collection of data, the researcher is also the instrument to analyze the data (Bloomberg, 2023). Many authors have addressed the notion of the qualitative researcher-as-instrument and the resulting implications (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Indeed, qualitative researchers themselves are an important part of the research process either in terms of their own personal presence as researchers or in terms of their experiences in the field and with the reflexivity they bring to the role as researcher (Bloomberg, 2023).

RESEARCHER-AS-INSTRUMENT

An underlying assumption of qualitative research is that rich data that is nested in real context can be captured only by way of the interactive process between the researcher and the participants. As such, research becomes a *dialogic* process with the subjective lenses that *both* the researcher and research participants bring to a qualitative study that are part of the context for the findings (Bloomberg, 2023). Collaborative, participatory, and critical research designs such as action research and cooperative inquiry highlight positioning and representation within research accounts by including participants' responses to the researcher's findings and analyses. Participants thus play a significant role in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, emphasizing their voices and value. These concepts connect with specific qualitative research paradigms to provide a unique perspective for the researcher's role in the study. Important, too, are representational issues—that is, how the other will be represented—which brings to the fore the issue of *insider–outsider status*, especially as this pertains to vulnerable and marginal groups (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Shaw et al., 2020). Because the researcher strives to describe the meaning of the

findings from the perspective of the research participants, to achieve this goal, data are gathered directly from the participants. This conversation between researcher and participants' perspectives enables better understanding of the complexities of positionality, power, privilege, ownership, and interpretive authority in the qualitative research process (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017).

Because description, understanding, interpretation, and communication are the primary goals of qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Whereas in quantitative research the impact of researcher subjectivity is considered a limitation that needs to be controlled for, in qualitative studies, explored subjectivities are an asset that indeed enrich and enhance the work, providing an additional level of credibility. Hence, the subjective nature embraces an introspective approach to capture an additional depth of analysis. However, researcher-as-instrument raises important ethical, accountability, and social justice issues. Literature on researcher-as-instrument has illustrated that this concept has been examined in different ways by focusing on the qualitative researcher's reflexivity, positionality, and identity during the research process, particularly in terms of the interpretation and presentation of research findings (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). Importantly, the reflexive researcher understands that all research is value-bound and that a reflective stance is therefore imperative, that is, the explicit self-consciousness on the part of the researcher, including social, political, and value positions. As such, reflexivity has become one of the key markers indicating the trustworthiness, rigor, and ethical integrity of the research.

REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is important in ensuring that the data collection methods, sampling strategies, and analytic techniques, among other decisions taken throughout the research process, are justified within the context of the study (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Lazard & McAvoy, 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2022; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023; Shaw et al., 2020). Reflexivity also prepares researchers for what sometimes may be unexpected, ethically important moments that will emerge as they plan for, conduct, and finally write their study (Bloomberg, 2023). Reflexivity has been an integral part of the qualitative research tradition for decades. However, a growing body of literature has also considered how reflexivity may be a useful tool for *quantitative* research (Jamieson et al., 2023). Essentially, a reflexive approach means that researchers must acknowledge and disclose themselves in the research, aiming to understand their own influence on the process rather than trying to eliminate their affect (Bloomberg, 2023). This requires explicit self-consciousness and self-assessment by the researcher about their own views and how these views may influence the design, execution, and interpretation of the research data and findings. Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) offer a synthesized definition of reflexivity as a "set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes" (p. 242). Olmos-Vega et al. (2022) discuss four types of reflexivity:

> ***Personal reflexivity*** requires researchers to reflect on and clarify their expectations, assumptions, and conscious and unconscious reactions to contexts, participants, and the data. Engaging in personal reflexivity should go beyond disclosing the researcher's background and training to include descriptions of how

the researcher's prior experiences and motivations might influence the decisions made throughout the study.

Interpersonal reflexivity refers to how the relationships surrounding the research process influence the context, people involved, and the study's findings. A thoughtful approach to interpersonal reflexivity involves recognizing and appreciating research participants' unique knowledge and perspectives and attending to the resulting impact on the research process and how they interpret our questions. This recognition and appreciation do not stem from a neutral space, however, and so interpersonal reflexivity must also include an analysis of the power dynamics at play in the research process.

Methodological reflexivity refers to researchers critically considering the nuances and impacts of their methodological decisions. This begins with thoughtful consideration of researchers' paradigmatic orientation or worldview that informs the overall research design as research decisions and, as such, weaves its way throughout the research processes, ultimately affecting the study's findings and the analysis thereof.

Contextual reflexivity refers to locating a particular study within its cultural and historical context, highlighting how and in what ways the study's research questions and participants' responses are embedded within and influenced by social and cultural assumptions, practices, and traditions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Facing the complexity of the researcher's positionality, reflexivity is a cornerstone of qualitative research, and is vital for establishing the researcher's credibility and integrity as the *instrument of inquiry*. This critical self-examination ensures that research findings authentically represent the experiences and viewpoints of participants, free from the overlay of the researcher's preconceived ideas. Engagement with participants in their social worlds is essential to understanding their subjective meanings, and it is important that the study's findings are informed by the data rather than the researcher's own preconceptions. As the primary instrument in your study, your skills, experience, and personal insights directly shape data collection and analysis, requiring that you exercise careful reflection. To address potential bias, you will employ at least three reflexivity techniques (Bloomberg, 2023). First, engage in systematic *reflective journaling* to document your thoughts, assumptions, and reactions throughout the research process. Keeping a research journal provides an ongoing structured opportunity to develop a research habit that can serve to deepen your thinking around critical issues and processes by creating a space for intentional reflection, contributing to the study's audit trail. Second, participate in *peer debriefings*, where you share your analysis and interpretations with colleagues to ensure external perspectives challenge your biases. Finally, implement *member checking* to encourage participants to verify the accuracy of your findings, ensuring these align with the participants' intended perspectives. These critical practices align with ethical research standards, ensuring that your study maintains integrity, fairness, and respect for participants' lived and shared experiences. Maintaining an ongoing reflexive approach ensures a critical review of the involvement of the researcher in the research and how this impacts

the processes and outcomes of the research. After all, it is only through the self-awareness and subsequent analysis of your subjectivity by way of thoughtful and authentic reflectivity that you can guide your own actions in a more insightful way throughout the research process, thereby protecting the ethical rights of your research participants.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 6 (researcher positionality)
- 7 (research ethics)
- 15 (journal and memo)
- 66 (interpreting findings)
- 68 (researcher credibility)
- 90 (transparency and criticality)
- 94 (positionality statement)
- 98 (researcher reflections)
- 102 (dissertation evaluation)

6 WHAT IS MEANT BY *POSITIONALITY*, AND HOW DO RESEARCHERS' SUBJECTIVITY AND POWER DYNAMICS PLAY OUT IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS?

Positionality applies to a researcher's role, social location, and identity with regard to the complex relationships that play out within the context of the research. Researcher positionality and the researcher's status as an insider or outsider has implications for the topics we choose to study, the way we conduct research and engage with our research participants, how we analyze our data, and how we communicate our findings (Shaw et al., 2020). Positionality is *multidimensional and fluid*, and as the researcher, it is imperative to consider the ways in which your race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic class, disability status, or other social or cultural factors have an impact on how you "show up," relate to, and communicate with your research participants. Piedra (2023) demonstrates how both researchers' and participants' positionality, as a "shifting analytical building block" can be used to enhance the rigor of qualitative research. The research we conduct represents a shared space that is shaped by both researcher and participants, and so the "intersecting identities" of both researcher and participants have the potential to profoundly affect the research process (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Identities come into play via our perceptions not only of others but also of the ways in which we expect others will perceive us. Issues of positionality apply not only to the relationship between researcher and research participants but also to the subject matter of the research itself (Mason-Bish, 2019). As such, it is important to acknowledge the delicate balance between positionality and research topic, which is very much shaped by the identity and positionality of everyone involved in the study (Bloomberg, 2023; Saldaña, 2018).

RESEARCHER SUBJECTIVITY

Considering the prominence of the researcher as a primary instrument of the research has significant implications in all the ways that the subjectivity of the researcher profoundly shapes the research process (Bourke, 2014; Dean et al., 2018; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Holmes, 2020; Sultana, 2015). Related to subjectivity is the expression of voice that results in the reporting of the research findings. Through this voice, the researcher leaves their own signature, or *footprint*, on the study. An understanding of positionality and reflexive practice is a direct support to ethical research practices. Reflexive practice allows you to remain alert to power dynamics and ensure you do not unintentionally exploit

or marginalize participants during data collection and analysis. It is clear that human interactions do not occur on a neutral stage but rather in the real world of hierarchical power relations (Cervero et al., 2001). Positionality is an important consideration in qualitative research because it influences every phase of the research process from the way the research problem, purpose, and questions are initially constructed; the way the study is designed; who is invited or recruited to participate (who is being included and who is being excluded); the selection of the research site (or sites); the choice of data collection methods; how data are analyzed and interpreted; what types of conclusions and recommendations are provided; and finally the ways in which outcomes and findings are disseminated and published. Qualitative analysis consists of two related concepts: the ways in which the researcher accounts for the experiences of the research participants and the ways in which participants themselves make meaning of their experiences. At its core, qualitative research is about sharing, respecting, and most importantly *authentically and ethically representing diverse participant voices*. This becomes especially pertinent when conducting critical qualitative research where "representation of the other" and "giving voice to our research participants" is central to the research endeavor (Cannella et al., 2015; Chilisa, 2020; Darder, 2019; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Patel, 2016; Smith, 2021).

POWER DYNAMICS

All aspects of our identities are shaped by socially constructed positions that are embedded in society as a system (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Positionality is thus determined by where one stands in relation to the other, and so who we are and what roles we assume in our research will translate into issues of power. Because the broader social context is duplicated within the research context, enacting the role of the researcher will reproduce the inherent hierarchical power structures that privilege some, silence some, and deny the existence of others. Qualitative research considers the positionality of both the researcher and the researched as core aspects of inquiry to understand how knowledge and experience are situated, co-constructed, and historically and socially located. Reflexivity does not only allow for richer data but also requires researchers to consider power within and surrounding the research process and to employ an ethic of care for their subjects and for the overall work of qualitative research (Reich, 2021).

To be attentive to issues of diversity and inclusion in our research, it is critically important to highlight the ways research participants who identify as minorities or underrepresented or marginalized groups might feel as they engage with a researcher. Researchers must be cognizant of the power dynamics especially with vulnerable populations and be cognizant of a potential power differential. There is an oppressive nature associated with much of research that has been conducted *on* Indigenous communities or groups with research being seen as a "colonial tool." It is therefore particularly significant to pay attention to positionality and power relations when conducting international research where fieldwork involves being attentive to histories of colonialism and local realities and to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination, control, and Western biases (Sultana, 2015). Failure to account for unexpected power dynamics between participants and the researcher can lead some participants feeling pressured to disclose personal details that they are not comfortable talking about, or feel silenced, preventing them from sharing the fullness of their experience. In such cases, participants can be inadvertently harmed and data quality can suffer. A heightened focus on these systems

of marginalization and hierarchical power imbalances further highlights the centrality of researcher reflexivity as we strive for equity and inclusion in our research.

REFLEXIVITY

Soedirgo and Glas (2020) explain one means of recognizing and responding to positionality in practice: a posture of "active reflexivity." These authors outlined how researchers can become actively reflexive by adopting a disposition toward both ongoing reflection about their own social location and ongoing reflection on their assumptions regarding others' perceptions. Incorporating peer or colleague feedback to uncover researcher blind spots can help researchers revise and improve their research strategies and pursue better working relationships, leading to new insights (Soedirgo & Glas, 2020). Every researcher has personal biases; however, through reflexive practices, the researcher can work toward reducing the impact of personal bias on the outcomes of their study (Folkes, 2023). Reflexivity is the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of the researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgment and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcomes. Jacobson and Mustafa (2019) acknowledge the challenges involved in conceptualizing and exploring positionality and developed a "social identity map" that researchers can utilize to explicitly identify and reflect on their social identity and positionality as they engage in their research. Strunk and Locke (2019) have expanded the definition of reflexivity as "an analysis of researchers' positionalities within a study. They interrogate their social positioning and social location, especially in relation to the purpose of the study and their participants" (p. 303). As such, reflexivity can be considered as introspective internal dialogue that can reveal and unravel "uncomfortable realities" (Woodley & Smith, 2020, p. 2). It is critical to pay attention to positionality, reflexivity, the production of knowledge, and the power relations that are inherent in research processes to undertake ethical research, especially in international field research contexts (Sultana, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

Awareness of bias can help the researcher limit interpreting data to reflect their expected findings based upon their own experiences or predispositions. The key value to take away is self-awareness. As the researcher, the instrument for data collection and analysis, and the one who will tell the story of the participants and the findings drawn from them, it is important to be aware of your values, beliefs, thoughts, biases, culture, and position and how all those personal factors can potentially influence your research. Reflexivity implies recognizing and acknowledging the integral part you play throughout the research process; in the construction of and contribution to the content and process of your research throughout its conceptualization, development, enactment, and write-up. Toward this end, it is a useful practice to keep a research journal because this provides an ongoing structured opportunity to develop a research habit that can serve to deepen your thinking around critical issues and processes by creating a space for intentional and ongoing reflection (Bloomberg, 2023). As we dig further into our own positionality, we explore and uncover our own personal and/or professional needs to conduct the research and our social and cultural background including political and ideological assumptions that

will ultimately shape the entire research process. An important outcome of reflexivity is unearthing power dynamics and coming to know, acknowledge, and respect the boundaries between ourselves as researchers and our research participants. Open and transparent disclosure and articulation of positionality in your dissertation serves to explain how and in what ways you, as the researcher, acknowledge that you have influenced your research. In turn, the reader will be able to make an informed judgment as to how and in what ways your own perspective and stance might have shaped the research process and outcomes and to what extent the research can be considered ethical, rigorous, and trustworthy.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 2 (critical qualitative research)
- 5 (researcher-as-instrument)
- 7 (research ethics)
- 66 (interpreting findings)
- 68 (researcher credibility)
- 69 (cultural integrity)
- 90 (transparency and criticality)
- 94 (positionality statement)
- 98 (researcher reflections)

7 WHAT ARE THE KEY ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN CONDUCTING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Adherence to research ethics and embracing reflexivity are indispensable for ensuring the trustworthiness and rigor of qualitative research. Rigorous research and ethical research are two sides of the same coin and are mutually interdependent (Bloomberg, 2023). Ethics in qualitative research is concerned with the shared principles that qualitative researchers purport to uphold that guide our behavior in the field and our interactions with research participants. In any research study, ethical issues relating to protection of the participants are of vital concern. As researchers, we are morally bound to conduct our research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to all of those involved in the study.

The central issue with respect to protecting research participants is the ways in which information is treated and disseminated, and the conduct of research with human participants, including how issues of confidentiality and anonymity are addressed, as laid out in the Belmont Report (1979) of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. This report helps protect the rights of research participants by making clear what is expected of researchers and how to ensure that research does not violate these rights. The Belmont Report (1979) also states, "The Hippocratic maxim 'do no harm' has long been a fundamental principle of medical ethics. Claude Bernard extended it to the realm of research, saying that one should not injure one person regardless of the benefits that might come to others" (p. 5). This statement provides the basis for ethical considerations when conducting research that includes human participants.

THE BELMONT REPORT

The three principles of the Belmont Report, respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which have become the three pillars of research ethics, were later operationalized (in 2018) into the detailed rules and procedures that make up the Common Rule, which governs research regulations at U.S. universities. The processes you are required to follow and the requirements by which you are expected to conform for approval to conduct research with human participants are not arbitrary. Indeed, these requirements and standards form part of a research governance system that emerged as a response to abuses that occurred historically with human biomedical experimentation in social and behavioral science studies. These regulatory structures are in place to inform research review and approval to protect people who participate in research studies, and uphold their rights, and as such are enforced by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs; Durdella, 2023). In working on your dissertation research, you will need to indicate that your study was conducted in a manner

that upholds the following three principles of the Belmont Report, both conceptually and in practice:

> ***Respect for persons (individual agency)*** is concerned with avoiding the abuse of research participants by sharing of information regarding the study and recognizing a participant's capacity for deciding to participate on a voluntary basis. Participants in a research study must be treated as autonomous agents capable of making informed decisions concerning whether to participate in a study. In addition to capable and informed, all potential participants must be free of coercion or undue influence. Furthermore, persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection.

> ***Beneficence (individual benefits and broad benefits)*** focuses the researcher's attention on doing no harm and ensures the obligation to weigh the benefits of the research against a participant's exposure to risk as a result of participation in the study. All persons must be treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm but also by making efforts to secure their well-being.

> ***Justice (fair distribution of benefits)*** relates to selection of participants with a focus on who will benefit from the study and who will bear the burden for participation. Justice refers to the fair and equitable treatment of all individuals and groups selected for participation and is applied to ensure equality in the selection of potential research participants. An injustice occurs when some benefit to which a person is entitled is denied or withheld without good reason or when some burden is unduly imposed.

Consent, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

Along with the three principles addressed in the Belmont Report regarding participants rights, there are four concepts that must be applied to help uphold respect, beneficence, and justice: informed consent, assent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

Informed consent is a moral principle of respect for persons and is central to research ethics. Informed consent is an important aspect of human subject research designed to uphold individual autonomy and the moral principle of respect for persons. The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research has articulated three distinct elements of informed consent as "information, comprehension, and voluntariness." It is this principle that seeks to ensure that all human subjects retain autonomy and the ability to judge for themselves what risks are worth taking for the purpose of furthering scientific knowledge (Johnson & Nelson, 2000). As such, written consent to voluntarily proceed with the study must be received from each research participant. In cases where participants are unable to provide written consent, it is essential to obtain *assent* from their parents or guardians. Assent is needed when research participants are underage, have a cognitive impairment, or for any reason cannot provide legal consent (Johnson & Nelson, 2000). Additionally, all participants' rights and interests must be considered of primary importance when choices are made regarding the reporting and dissemination of data:

- Researchers must commit to maintaining the *confidentiality* of all names and identifying characteristics of the research site.

- Cautionary measures must be taken to secure the storage of research-related records and data, and nobody other than the researcher should have access to this material, which ensures *anonymity* for each of the research participants.

Vulnerable Populations

Children, prisoners, women who are pregnant, individuals with impaired decision-making capacity, and economically or educationally disadvantaged persons are all considered vulnerable populations. It is important to note that there are specific ethical considerations with respect to particular vulnerable populations, and concerns from an ethical perspective can include historically marginalized or otherwise underrepresented or underserved groups and groups that are minoritized or mistreated. This underscores the necessity for researchers working with vulnerable groups about sensitive topics to approach data collection and dissemination with an added level of empathy, care, and respect (Durdella, 2023; Shaw at al., 2020).

Some individuals or groups who are vulnerable may become the focus of study merely for ease or convenience of access or because risks of harm or burdens to them are minimized. Be sure that you carefully consider the characteristics of the specific population to be studied in addition to specific situational factors, and also be cautious to avoid stereotyping individuals and groups because they are vulnerable minorities. Determine any potential vulnerabilities and, if so, whether there is adequate justification to include these persons in the research and what additional protections may be required. Moreover, regarding the latter consideration, researchers must also consider the risk of harm to individual research participants and populations if they are *excluded* from participation. With the significant changes in the ways that research is conducted since the pandemic, there is a need to focus on how to minimize exclusion and carry out ethical research. This includes *ensuring access* (because vulnerable populations may lack the capabilities to participate in a study), *addressing digital literacy* (in cases where technical ability is needed to participate in a study), redesigning sampling and selection strategies, ensuring informed consent, and the appropriate use of secondary or archival data, all of which creates a climate of ethical research.

The Belmont Report (1979) addresses exclusionary issues related to the principle of justice, explaining that individuals cannot be excluded from research studies due to their condition nor can they be included by way of manipulation, force, or coercion, that is, any form of *undue influence*. Rather, all decisions pertaining to research participation must be made carefully and thoughtfully to protect all individuals and groups and at the same time promote the benefits of the research. The Common Rule is a regulatory framework that promotes the principle and practice of justice in a number of ways, and these have direct applicability specifically to vulnerable populations:

- Sampling guidelines to ensure equitable research participation and avoid intentional exclusion

- Safeguards against coercion and undue influence by way of voluntary consent

- Steps to minimize risk and make known the study's direct benefits

- Rules to identify a legally authorized representative for those individuals who have impaired decision-making capacity, or who lack the ability to provide consent

- Requirements to maintain an ongoing consent process in the event of any changes that may occur during the conduct of the research

REFLEXIVITY

To ensure rigor and ethics in qualitative research implies ongoing self-reflectivity on the part of the researcher. Reflexivity is the active, ongoing process of examining oneself as a researcher and remaining aware of how one's assumptions, biases, and preconceptions affect our research decisions. Importantly, reflexivity can help prepare researchers for many ethically important moments that will emerge as they plan for, conduct, and finally write their study. Remember that your power and positionality as a researcher are also directly connected to research ethics. In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument used to directly collect data, and so ongoing checking of your implicit and explicit biases with regard to your research participants is an imperative. In the methodology chapter of your dissertation, you will need to show the reader that you have considered the ethical issues that might arise vis-à-vis your own study, that you are sensitive to these issues, and that you have taken the necessary steps to address these issues. Ethical considerations for dissertation research will typically include informed consent, participant privacy (anonymity and confidentiality), and researcher positionality (Bloomberg, 2023). Because protection of human subjects is such an important issue in social science research, the main point is that you acknowledge and convey to the reader that you have considered and taken heed of all *potential or actual issues* involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

The traditional ethical safeguards are a starting point, and it is critical that researchers develop an ethical praxis (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). Researchers must be ready to respond ethically and employ ongoing safety precautions throughout a study that may include additional consent discussions (Head, 2020; Roth & von Unger, 2018; Tolich & Tumilty, 2020). In addition to upholding the principles of the Belmont Report, Lahman (2025) introduces the concept of culturally responsive research ethics. As explained, researchers may not be able to understand the cultures of all their research participants, but it is imperative to explore ethical considerations from the perspectives of the participants and their intersecting identities. To understand the perspectives of your participants and co-construct knowledge with them, you strive to be socio-culturally conscious, practice cultural humility, operate from an asset-based framework viewing all participants' identities and backgrounds as opportunities for research, and remain reflexive throughout the research experience (Lahman, 2025). Ethical reflexivity is *integral to research practice*.

Ethical considerations begin at the stage of topic development and continue throughout the research process. Ethically, you must first ask yourself what the potential value or significance of research on the proposed topic might be. The value or significance of

a research topic is determined by who will benefit from new knowledge on the topic, whether and to what extent the research will address an identified social need, and the potential of the research to promote new learning, social justice, or meaningful social change, particularly for underrepresented persons or groups. Second, you must ensure there are no potential conflicts of interest. For example, if your research is funded, you will need to ensure that the funder's agenda does not compete with your own research agenda, and there should be no pressure or monetary gain for deriving certain prescribed outcomes or research findings. Finally, and perhaps most critical, is the content that you share and how you shape that content because, as the researcher, it is up to you to decide what data are included and what data, if any, are omitted. As a part of this consideration, you will also need to make ethical decisions about how to address and share any unexpected findings, anomalies, or outliers, none of which should be overlooked or ignored.

As researchers, we are morally bound to conduct our research in a manner that minimizes potential harm to those involved in the study. We should be as concerned with producing an ethical research design as we are an intellectually coherent and compelling one. Colleges, universities, and other institutions that conduct research have IRBs whose members review research proposals to assess ethical issues. Although all studies must be approved by your institution's IRB committee, there are some unique ethical considerations surrounding qualitative research because of its emergent and flexible design. Ethical issues can indeed arise in all phases of the research process: data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of the research findings. For the most part, issues of ethics focus on establishing safeguards that will protect the rights of participants and include informed consent, protecting participants from harm and ensuring confidentiality. As a qualitative researcher, you need to remain attentive throughout your study to the researcher–participant relationship, which is determined by positionality, roles, status, and cultural norms.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 3 (research rigor)
- 5 (researcher-as-instrument)
- 6 (researcher positionality)
- 15 (journal and memo)
- 46 (Institutional Review Board approval)
- 90 (transparency and criticality)
- 102 (dissertation evaluation).

8

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE SECONDARY RESEARCH, AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS, LIMITATIONS, AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS WITH THIS TYPE OF RESEARCH?

The internet is a burgeoning field site for qualitative research, serving as an umbrella for multiple and multimodal digital technologies, capacities, uses, and social spaces, including social media, social networking sites, and discussion forums. We are currently witnessing what Roulson and deMarrais (2021) refer to as the "archival turn" with archived records and material culture (including manuscripts, documents, audio- and video-recordings, and visual and material culture) providing a wealth of resources for qualitative researchers seeking to conduct research in the social sciences. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic indeed exacerbated the need for access to archival data as social distancing precluded the use of in-person data collection, and subsequently this phenomenon and the inherent value and use of archival data has tended to increase (Bloomberg, 2023). The selection of technology tools and settings for collecting data online has also greatly expanded the kinds of communication possible with participants and the types of data collected, whether text, verbal or visual, or synchronous or asynchronous. Given the unique characteristics of the online environment and communication, different ways are needed to classify the types of data collected. Salmons (2017a) describes three types of online data collection:

- **Elicited:** The researcher elicits consenting participants' responses and has direct interaction with participants who consent to participate. Data collection can occur either synchronously or asynchronously.

- **Enacted:** This is an approach for generating data through some type of online activity that engages the researcher and participants in the generation of data. As with elicited data collection, the researcher interacts directly with consenting research participants.

- **Extant:** Much online communication involves posting text, images, or other materials on websites, blogs, social networking sites, or various communications applications. Collecting this kind of data involves adapting traditional qualitative data collection tools, and data collection can occur either synchronously or asynchronously. The difference is that the researcher usually has no direct contact with users unless the study entails consent or permissions.

Qualitative data collection involves various types of data collection methods, including interviews, observations, and document or archival analysis. Qualitative secondary research is a systematic approach to using *extant data* that has already been created or generated and that exists as archival data. As Largan and Morris (2019) define it, "Qualitative secondary research is a systematic approach to the use of existing data to provide ways of understanding that may be additional to or different from the data's original purpose" (p. 14). Whereas primary research involves collecting data based on firsthand engagement with participants, in qualitative secondary research a researcher uses archival data that are available in many forms and can be accessed from a multitude of sources, mostly via the internet.

BENEFITS OF SECONDARY RESEARCH

As Largan and Morris (2019) and Hughes and Tarrant (2020) explain, the benefits of conducting secondary research include the following:

- It is possible to gain in-depth perspectives through an exploration of historical data with a focus on a specific individual or a specific event that is social, political, economic, or cultural. Approaching data in this way means the researcher can experience new-for-old understandings because the existing data can be reviewed using new or revised questions, thereby enabling comparative understanding. This can offer the advantage of hindsight because old ways of thinking are exposed to the new.

- This approach enables working with complexity across projects by making use of diverse data as the secondary analyst seeks to engage with data created in different ways and for different purposes. Researchers can bring data into meaningful comparison through cross-project mapping of the content to enhance their understanding of the data and enable comparison along the dimensions of interest and relevance, thereby addressing research questions in a more holistic way by adopting a multidimensional research approach.

- Secondary research offers researchers a chance to test ideas and theories that have been created through empirical research, thereby providing a means of verifying, refuting, or refining the findings of primary studies. Using data in this way means that researchers can reinterpret findings and possibly reveal new insights and hidden or unexpected relationships. Approaching research in this way has the potential to generate new knowledge because the researcher is essentially exploring existing research from a new perspective.

- Factors such as time and cost are common reasons to undertake qualitative secondary research. Access to existing data can speed the research process because some of the most time-consuming steps of a typical research project such as data collection have been eliminated. One of the main benefits of qualitative secondary research is flexibility because the researcher is not constrained by geographic location and also has increased access to a vast amount of data from a range of devices.

- A researcher who seeks to study a sensitive topic may find that qualitative secondary research is the most appropriate approach in that this methodology creates some form of distance from the research participants. For these reasons, the researcher may be able to gain unobtrusive access to sensitive situations without having direct contact with the research participants. However, and importantly, there is still a strong ethical duty placed on any researcher to ensure confidentiality, privacy, and the right for those who offered their data not to be exposed to any harm.

LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

A critique of qualitative secondary research is related to the trustworthiness of the data, that is, whether it can be considered credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. A significant emphasis is placed on the responsibility of the qualitative secondary researcher to understand and determine the who, what, when, where, how, and why of data production. Understanding the quality of the data by having a deep knowledge of the context of its production is essential, and employing a critical approach will necessitate asking questions to determine the viability of data:

- **Authenticity:** Is the evidence (data) genuine and authentic?

- **Credibility:** Is the evidence (data) accurate?

- **Representativeness:** Is the evidence (data) typical or atypical of its kind?

- **Meaning:** Is the evidence (data) clear and comprehensible?

All researchers should be aware that qualitative secondary research involves the same level of critical and analytical engagement and reflexivity as is expected with all forms of primary research.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 7 (research ethics)

- 46 (Institutional Review Board approval)

- 53 (online research ethics)

- 55 (triangulation)

9 WHAT CONSTITUTES A QUALITATIVE DISSERTATION?

In essence, qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of narrative and visual (nonnumerical) data to gain insight into a particular phenomenon of interest. Taking place within natural or nonmanipulated settings, qualitative research allows for complex social phenomena to be viewed holistically. Qualitative research addresses the question of what. Knowing what something is entails a conceptualization of the phenomenon or experience as a whole as well as its multiple parts. Knowing what something is also involves the conceptualization of its how; that is, its process and unfolding. Importantly, qualitative research includes an understanding of context, circumstance, environment, and milieu.

Deep understanding about an experience, situation, or event, in all its real-world complexity, and an ability to describe, explain, and communicate that understanding, lie at the core of qualitative research. Qualitative research is focused on promoting this deep understanding of a social setting or activity from the perspective of the research participants themselves. This exploratory approach implies an emphasis on exploration, discovery, and description. Quantitative research, in contrast, is applied to describe current conditions, investigate relationships, and study cause–effect phenomena. Both research approaches involve complex processes in which particular data collection and data analysis methods assume meaning and significance in relation to the assumptions underlying the larger intellectual traditions within which these methods are applied.

The journey of dissertation writing constitutes a meticulous orchestration of conceptualizing, planning, and executing a research study that addresses the research problem. Within this journey, the choice of data collection methods is of paramount importance as this lays the foundation for the entire research undertaking. For qualitative researchers, the challenge lies in selecting and triangulating a set of appropriate methods and harnessing these methods in combination to yield meaningful and trustworthy data. Qualitative research methods are distinct in their focus on understanding phenomena through the lens of the participants' perspectives, contextual nuances, and the complexity of real-life settings. Unlike quantitative research, which emphasizes numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research seeks to capture the depth and breadth of human experiences, which necessitates robust methods capable of navigating the subtleties of human interactions, perceptions, and sociocultural dynamics.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

All qualitative dissertations must achieve the following:

- Summary, analysis, and integration of scholarly literature and research relevant to a topic area, focusing on developments in the area in recent years

- Presentation of original research in an area related to a student's program and specialization—PhD dissertations will demonstrate how research contributes to theoretical development in an area, whereas applied doctoral dissertations (EdD) typically contribute to practice by addressing real-world challenges pertaining to the education sector.

- Development of evidence-based solutions to address current educational issues

- Demonstration that autonomous or collaborative research was conducted using high-level data collection and data analysis skills

- Integration of all ethical principles and professional standards related to research with human subjects

Be reminded that there are a number of key institutional differences and requirements regarding the structure of a dissertation. Whereas the chapter titles are worded to reflect their content, these might be organized differently or presented in a different order or format based on course or program requirements. Of note is that some universities or programs traditionally adopt a six-chapter dissertation. Others may require a five-chapter dissertation by combining analysis of data, reporting findings, and analyzing and interpreting those findings into a single chapter. Moreover, some institutions now offer applied doctoral degrees (also referred to as a *dissertation–in–practice*) with the traditional dissertation being condensed into three chapters or *sections*. The dissertation manuscript will ultimately need to conform to the specified outline and templates provided by your institution, and so it is critical that you review the correct protocols and templates for the school and program in which you are enrolled and consult with your dissertation advisor to fully understand the requirements and the available options.

As Bloomberg (2023) points, the goal of undertaking and completing a dissertation is to obtain the credentials by demonstrating that you understand and can therefore conduct good and credible research. A dissertation is the combination of performing research and writing about your research to describe and explain it. As such, a qualitative dissertation is an exercise in conducting a rigorous qualitative research study, adhering to all prescribed methodological principles and standards, and presenting the study's methodology and findings in a manner consistent with the many necessary institutional requirements at each stage of the dissertation process. Creativity comes into play through your own initiative with regard to how you design your instruments; develop your theoretical or conceptual framework and related coding schemes; present your findings; and analyze, interpret, and synthesize your data. That said, qualitative research must not be viewed as an exercise in creative writing when it is, in fact, an exercise in conducting a research project that is integrative and intellectually rigorous. Ultimately, rigor, structure, and full transparency are all necessary—and indeed essential—to account

for subjectivity and bias, thereby keeping creative speculation in check. *Visualizing the Dissertation Process*, a figure in Bloomberg (2023), is a tool that depicts the cyclical and complex qualitative dissertation process in its entirety. This figure demonstrates the iterative nature of qualitative research by illustrating the relationships between and among multiple components. The figure also sheds light on the continuum of movement among technical (micro), practical (macro), and conceptual (meta) levels of thinking and explains the inherent hierarchy of activities that constitute the complex and multifaceted dissertation process.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 1 (qualitative and quantitative research)

- 3 (research rigor)

- 7 (research ethics)

- 10 (EdD and PhD degrees)

- 29 (alignment)

- 31 (methodological congruence)

- 98 (researcher reflections)

- 102 (dissertation evaluation)

10 WHAT ARE THE SIMILARITIES AND KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE PhD AND EdD DEGREES, AND HOW DO THE DIFFERENCES PLAY OUT IN THE DISSERTATION?

If you are considering undertaking a doctorate, it is certainly important to develop a clear understanding of the conceptual and structural differences between *Doctor of Philosophy* (PhD) and *Doctor of Education* (EdD) degrees and learn more about the program focus, dissertation research objectives, and the scope for these degree tracks prior to enrollment. Some background information is useful to situate these two terminal degree tracks in context. Doctoral degrees have existed in universities since the Middle Ages with the doctor of philosophy degree being the standard for research-based, nonmedical doctorates. Whereas the PhD originated in Europe, the EdD originated in the United States. Yale University awarded the first U.S. PhD in 1861. Harvard University established the first EdD degree program in 1920 as a response to the need for a more practitioner-based degree in education. In 2007 the Carnegie Project on the Education (CPED) doctorate determined that EdD graduates should be able to inquire into and reflect critically on their work and develop a personal pedagogy of practice. To do this, graduates must be able to identify and problematize issues stemming from practice and conduct rigorous inquiry into educational practice (Wergin, 2011). Many institutions of higher education have translated these conceptual ideas regarding the educational doctorate into practice by designing and launching new and unique professional practice doctoral programs through their participation in CPED.

PhD AND EdD SIMILARITIES

There are some key areas of overlap between these two degree tracks:

- Both degrees are both recognized and respected terminal degrees in higher education. An institution will offer an EdD, however, as its name implies, only in fields related to education, whereas a PhD can be a terminal degree in education-related fields as well as other disciplines.

- Both degrees require that students complete a rigorous program of study and research, and both the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation recognize the degrees as equivalent.

- Both the PhD and the EdD require a rigorous course of study beyond the master's degree, although the number of courses will vary by program and institution.

- Each degree requires a student to pass a comprehensive examination and write a dissertation that the student will have to defend before a committee before receiving the degree.

- Those who have successfully completed the requirements for either of these terminal degrees may use the title *doctor*.

PhD AND EdD DIFFERENCES

Although these two degrees are equivalent in terms of worth and value, they serve different purposes based on a student's professional goals and career aspirations. The greatest differences between the two degrees are related to the *focus of the curriculum, the type of research that will be conducted,* and the *dissertation focus and structure.* Both degree tracks offer a range of professional opportunities both within and outside of higher education. Both PhD and EdD dissertations require scholarly and rigorous research, reviews of literature, and IRB approval. There are some important distinctions in the research you would conduct in the PhD versus EdD programs. A caveat is that the following are broad descriptions of the EdD and PhD, and some programs may vary according to specific requirements:

PhD is described as theoretical-based research that focuses on furthering knowledge in the field by conducting research that enhances the profession. PhD research is rooted in theory and must incorporate substantial theoretical and empirical evidence to support its claims and purpose. If your research interest involves a broader contribution to the theoretical underpinnings of your discipline, you might be more interested in the PhD degree. In completing this degree, you will conduct research that contributes to the broader discipline rather than a specific problem rooted in applied professional practice. Corley and Gioia (2011) identify two dimensions of what constitutes a theoretical contribution: Originality can be categorized as either advancing understanding incrementally or advancing understanding in a way that provides some form of revelation or insight. Utility is divided into ideas that are practically useful and scientifically useful. In general, scientific utility is perceived as an advance that improves conceptual rigor or the specificity of an idea and/or enhances its potential to be operationalized and tested. PhD candidates are focused on adding new knowledge and theory to the existing research and often seek positions in higher education and academia and continue to focus on research and publication.

EdD is a practice-based doctorate in which students conduct research through inquiry into a problem of practice, an essentially *practitioner-centered approach*. The EdD degree offers professionals a unique opportunity to address real-world challenges pertaining to the education sector. If your research interest involves a complex problem narrow in scope, such as one inspired by a problem within your own organization, you might be more interested in the EdD degree. In this degree, you will explore a problem that is focused on practical applied practice within a professional education context or setting. Candidates for the EdD focus on problems within educational practice and often seek to work within the field of

education. EdD dissertations are not targeted toward adding new foundations for theory but rather are expected to address problem resolution through improved practice that is grounded in applied professional practice-based research. Because the EdD is targeted toward actual practice in the field, this is an appropriate choice for hands-on scholars who are interested in addressing current problems of practice in educational settings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DISSERTATION RESEARCH

In sum, the key research design differences between a research degree and an applied degree play out in terms of scope, focus, and significance. Both degree tracks require that the stated research design demonstrates scientific rigor. PhD research studies must have theoretical implications and contribute to the body of knowledge and literature. In contrast, the applied degree will be limited in scope to the specific study context, and the research findings should be significant to leaders and practitioners in the field. Additionally, aside from conceptual differences, the EdD dissertation is typically structurally different from a traditional PhD Dissertation, and the formatting of the chapters and the way the study is constructed and presented may vary to accommodate the different focus and requirements. Given the significant distinctions between the two degree tracks, it is important, therefore, to differentiate between PhD and EdD dissertations by examining each in terms of program focus, features, and outcomes. When making the choice between a PhD versus an EdD, what you need to consider is the next step you want to take in your career. Therefore, as you debate which program is most appropriate, consider your professional goals and aspirations, your plans for future employment, and your career. A strong recommendation is to access some completed dissertations to get a feel for what is required and expected, and this can be done by accessing the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database through your institution's library.

INTERRELATED NUGGETS

More questions? For additional information and insights see the following nuggets:

- 1 (qualitative and quantitative research)
- 3 (research rigor)
- 9 (qualitative dissertation features)
- 24 (topic development)
- 25 (research problem development)