

1

Introduction

Numbers are numbing; they cloak detail and may not excite people to action. Some numbers, like the federal deficit, are too overwhelming for individuals to focus on. This reality has been painfully illustrated in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with victims worldwide counted in the tens of millions—a scale too large to comprehend. It is possible, and even likely, to become numb toward the daily count of new infections, hospitalizations, and deaths, while human empathy may force us to listen to individual stories of loss and grief.

Statistics don't bleed. It is the detail that counts. We are unable . . . to process our total awareness: we can only focus on little lumps of reality.

—Arthur Koestler (1945, p. 92)

Qualitative research methodologies are now well-established, important modes of inquiry for the social sciences and applied fields, such as education, regional planning, health sciences, social work, community development, and management. Long dominated by research methods borrowed from the experimental sciences, the social sciences now present an array of alternative genres. One important genre, ethnography, includes autoethnography, virtual ethnography, compressed ethnography, and the more familiar generic ethnography, derived from anthropology. Phenomenological approaches grew directly from strands of Western philosophy, and interdisciplinary work has spawned sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, life histories, narrative analysis, arts-based inquiry, and visual methodologies. Such an array is sometimes confusing.

The critical traditions, including postmodern, post-structural, and postcolonial perspectives, contribute to critical discourse analysis, a variety of gender and feminist research approaches, critical race theory and analysis, queer theory and analysis, cultural studies, critical ethnography, and autoethnography. Emerging and intriguing modes of representation include performance ethnography and intersectional standpoint methodology, and the explosion of computer-based technologies has spawned Internet ethnography and multimodal forms of inquiry. Action research and participatory research, often explicitly ideological and emancipatory, intend to critique and

radically change fundamental social structures and processes and to reconceptualize the entire research enterprise. Many of these genres, derived from traditional and interdisciplinary scholarship, are now frequently used in policy studies and professional fields. More than two decades ago, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) noted, “The extent to which the ‘qualitative revolution’ is taking over the social sciences and related professional fields is nothing short of amazing” (p. ix); this is still true today.

Each of these disciplinary traditions rests on somewhat different assumptions about what constitutes proper inquiry within the qualitative, or interpretive, paradigm. Throughout this text, we refer to *qualitative research* and *qualitative inquiry* as if they were one agreed-on approach. If this were the case, it might be reassuring for you, but unfortunately it is not. As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) wrote, “qualitative research is a field of inquiry in its own right. It crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matters. A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surround [*sic*] the term *qualitative research*” (p. 2).

Qualitative research genres exist in great variety, and many excellent texts serve as guides to their assumptions and approaches. However, many qualitative researchers, despite their various methodological stances, tend to espouse some common values and enact a family of procedures for the conduct of a study. They are intrigued by the complexity of social interactions expressed in daily life and by the meanings the participants themselves attribute to these interactions. They

are also exquisitely aware that they work in and through interpretations—their own and others’—layered in complex hermeneutic circles. These interests take qualitative researchers into natural settings, rather than laboratories, and foster pragmatism in using multiple methods—“a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices”

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4)—for exploring a topic. Thus, qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people. Below we offer six general hallmarks of qualitative research and five common stances of researchers who practice it (see Rossman & Rallis, 2017, pp. 8–11; also see Table 1.1).

Qualitative research typically

- takes place in the natural world,
- draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study,
- focuses on context,
- is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured,
- is fundamentally interpretive, and
- assumes multiple truths exist, rather than one monolithic Truth.

Qualitative researchers, they maintain, tend to

- view social worlds as holistic and complex,
- engage in systematic reflection on who they are in the conduct of the research,

“

Qualitative research takes place in everyday worlds, not laboratories.

- remain sensitive to their own biographies/social identities and how these shape the study (i.e., they are reflexive),
- rely on complex reasoning that moves dialectically between deduction and induction, and
- conduct their inquiries systematically (see Table 1.1).

Qualitative research, then, is a broad approach to the study of social phenomena. The various genres are naturalistic, interpretive, and increasingly critical, and they typically draw on multiple methods of inquiry. This book is intended to be a guide for researchers who have chosen some genre of qualitative methods in their effort to understand—and perhaps change—a complex social phenomenon, and who seek to develop solid proposals for **ethical research practice** as they plan their inquiry.

The insightful case study, the rich description of ethnography, the narratives of complex personal journeys—all are the products of systematic inquiry. In their beginnings, however, they were modest research proposals. Three decades ago, qualitative researchers had to search hard to find useful guidelines for writing thorough, convincing research proposals. Since then, many useful texts have been published (we cite several at the end of this chapter); these texts provide guidance in learning how to craft a solid research proposal. They help fill the gap created, for example, by

Qualitative researchers assume multiple truths exist, not just one monolithic Truth.

TABLE 1.1 • Characteristics of Qualitative Research and Researchers

Qualitative Research
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Takes place in the natural world • Uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic • Focuses on context • Is emergent rather than tightly prefigured • Is fundamentally interpretive • Assumes multiple truths
Qualitative Researchers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View social phenomena holistically • Systematically reflect on who they are in the inquiry • Are sensitive to their personal biography and how it shapes the study • Use complex reasoning that is multifaceted and iterative • Conduct systematic inquiry

Source: Adapted from Rossman and Rallis (2017, pp. 7–9). Used with permission.

policy analyses that offer findings and recommendations with few details on how research led to them and by published reports of qualitative research that lack sufficient detail to provide strong examples of how the studies were designed. All too often, beginning qualitative researchers have difficulty learning how to design a useful and generative study from such reports. Other reports are written as if the process unfolded smoothly, with none of the messiness inherent in any research. These versions are also difficult to learn from. This book provides specific guidance for writing strong and convincing proposals for ethical research grounded in the assumptions and practice of qualitative methodology.

This book, organized as a guide through the process of writing a qualitative research proposal, shows you how to write a proposal that will convince reviewers. It will detail how to create a qualitative study that is useful and trustworthy by defining explicit steps to follow, principles to adhere to, and rationales for the strengths of qualitative research.

Although qualitative research has an accepted place in formal research arenas—the “amazing takeover” described above—dissertation committees and reviewers for funding agencies still need to see proposals that are well developed, sound, rigorous, and ethical. This has become especially salient in the era of “the gold standard” promulgated by the U.S. government, which holds that randomized controlled trials are the preferred approach to producing useful and generalizable findings. Now, in the 2020s, the methodological wars are a distant memory and many researchers seek to manage mixing paradigms and pleasing old-school scholars—both quantitative and qualitative—by combining qualitative and quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012).

We, the authors of this book, have taken part in the steady progression of qualitative inquiry and indeed illustrate its evolution over the years. As we collaborated in this new edition, we came to think of ourselves as an intergenerational team, with each of us producing and being the result of particular moments in the rich history of qualitative inquiry. Marshall’s and Rossman’s earliest work survived through the 1980s, when qualitative inquiry was seen as belonging to anthropology and, in other fields, was denigrated as “just stories” or as not credible for journal articles or career building. “Real” research was seen as a search that would find positive Truths (positivism), which was equated with findings from experimental studies with control groups and hundreds of random subjects. Even sociology, the study of human group relationships, was dominated by statistics and searches through demography for cause–effect relationships.

But then came questioning of the ethics and impersonality of seeing people as “subjects” to be manipulated and, importantly, research focusing on particular variables without enough context. Too, postmodern and postcolonial thought brought forth the challenge to the idea that Truth was a stable, knowable goal. Women and people of color, knowing through too many experiences that the worth of their truths, needs, and realities was often ignored by those who could decide what should and should not be recognized, became more prominent voices. Then qualitative inquiry gained leaps and bounds, with infusions from feminist, gender, and critical theory and cultural studies. As well as thinking through their own frustrations, such literatures helped people begin to see that Truth was something people in power proclaimed,

further marginalizing silenced voices and reaffirming taken-for-granted systems of domination. Today, women, as well as Black people, Indigenous peoples, and people of color, along with LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and other minoritized groups, have created communities of affinity and allyship. While equal status and full participation are not yet a reality, many insights from these groups have become mainstream in the academic canon.

The three authors of this book have gloried in the emergence of robust qualitative inquiry. Marshall was Rossman's graduate studies professor, and both have taught hundreds of students the *hows* and *whys* of qualitative inquiry over the decades. Then Blanco was one of Rossman's students, continuing the lineage for you readers to perpetuate.

VIGNETTE 1

JOINING AN ONGOING CONVERSATION

Gerardo L. Blanco

In more than one way, participating in the development of a new edition of *Designing Qualitative Research* feels like joining an ongoing conversation. Both as a graduate student and as a faculty member, *DQR* has been an important resource in my scholarship. Adding my voice as an author to this text that has been a companion to so many qualitative researchers in many fields could be a daunting undertaking. How do you join a conversation that has been going on for three decades? My attempt at answering this question involves listening for meaning, but also for tone and inflection, and identifying the pauses where you can—hopefully—add something to the conversation.

While I share many perspectives with Marshall and Rossman, by virtue of the academic lineage we have discussed, my experiences differ from theirs in some ways. For as long as I have been in the field, qualitative research has been a credible way to conduct inquiry, researchers have had the option to use software for qualitative data analysis, and I have always had at least one expert faculty member—but often several—to provide advice on qualitative methods. For me, research is almost always something done in a borrowed language, English, different from my mother tongue, Spanish.

Sociologists, clinical psychologists, community health workers, criminologists, anthropologists, political scientists, regional planners, and others from a range of the social sciences and applied fields will find this guide useful. Throughout, we provide examples from many fields, with plenty from education (because of our own backgrounds). The principles, challenges, and opportunities are transferable across disciplines and into other applied fields.

This book does not replace the numerous texts, readers, journal articles, and websites that are important for learning about various qualitative genres and the nuances of their preferred methods. It is meant to complement those resources that explicate the philosophical bases, historical development, principles and methods of

practice, and findings of qualitative studies. Our purpose is to give practical, useful guidance for writing proposals that fit within the qualitative paradigm and that are successful.

“

Writing a proposal for qualitative research is messy and recursive.

We should mention, as a cautionary note, that many of the examples presented here—indeed, the entire structure and organization of the book—suggest that the processes of proposal development are linear and transparent. As we note throughout the text, this is not the case. The vignettes are written in well-polished prose, often because they are the final versions of sections in successful proposals.

The structure of the book may suggest that one proceeds from Point A to Point B in a seamless and quite logical manner. Such are the challenges of presenting an iterative, recursive process in formal academic writing. The looping back and forth, the frustrations—such things are masked. We trust that you will keep this in mind.

Considerations

When considering writing a proposal for a research study that will use qualitative methods, you may find it valuable to weigh three interrelated concerns that capture key questions of feasibility, competence and ethics, and interest; we refer to these as the **do-ability**, the **should-do-ability**, and the **want-to-do-ability**.

“Do-Ability”: Considerations of Feasibility

One set of considerations captures the feasibility, the “do-ability,” of the study. Is the study I am considering possible and realistic? Judgments about resources (time, money), access to the site or population of interest or both, and your knowledge and skills come into play here. Proposals seeking external funding and those for dissertation research must include a discussion of resources. Strategies to gain access to a site or identify participants for the study should also be discussed. Throughout the proposal, you should demonstrate your competence to conduct a thorough, ethical, qualitative research study. In citing the methodological literature and discussing pilot studies or previous research, you demonstrate your experience in conducting qualitative research and familiarity with the ongoing discourse on methodology, thereby situating your own work within the evolving context of research.

Thus, this set of questions focuses on considerations of feasibility. Are there sufficient resources to support the conduct of the study? Are access and willing participation likely in the setting? Is the study focused enough so it can be completed? Do you provide evidence of methodological competence?

“Should-Do-Ability”: Considerations of Potential Significance and Ethics

Another set of considerations in building a solid proposal addresses whether the study has the potential to contribute to theorizing and research—to the ongoing discourse

“

Can you conduct this study? Is it feasible? And are you capable?

in a social science discipline or an applied field, to policy issues and policymaking, and/or to issues of practice. Is this study likely to be useful to other researchers, policy-makers, practitioners? Are there major ethical pitfalls to be considered? You will need to argue that the study will likely contribute to scholarship, policy, and/or practice, and address the familiar question, “So what?” To this, you should respond cogently and knowledgeably when asked why the study should be conducted. Thus, this set of considerations centers on the following questions: Should the study be conducted? How will it contribute to scholarship? Policy deliberations? Practice?

However, another crucial facet of these “should” considerations is the critically important area of ethics and ethical practice: What ethical concerns or issues may arise? What resources can you draw on to respond sensitively to these issues? Because ethical concerns are so important in any inquiry involving human beings, we return to this topic in Chapter 3 and highlight it throughout the book.

“Want-to-Do-Ability”: Considerations of Sustained and Sustaining Interest

This set of questions captures your engagement with the topic. Far removed from the days of assertions of the dispassionate scientist, qualitative researchers (and all researchers, we claim) care deeply about the topic that they inquire about. Am I sufficiently committed to learning about this topic to sustain the energy to complete it? Qualitative research, however, is neither naively subjectivist nor biased (all-too-common criticisms). Rather, qualitative methodologies acknowledge that *all* research in the social science disciplines and applied fields may well be subjective (in the sense of a subjective caring), and shift the discourse to a discussion of epistemology and to considerations for ensuring trustworthy and credible studies (which we discuss more fully in Chapter 3). Thus, this third set of considerations captures the importance of commitment and compelling interest to sustain the study from design to implementation to analysis to sharing the findings.

The proposal, then, is an argument that makes the case and convinces reviewers that the study can be done and should be done, and that there is sufficient energy and interest to sustain it.

The Challenges

Research proposals consist of two major sections: (1) the **conceptual framework** and (2) the design and research methods. Roughly corresponding to the *what*—the substantive focus of the inquiry—and the *how*—the means for conducting it—these two sections describe in detail the specific topic or issue to be explored and the methods proposed for exploration. In a sound, well-developed, well-argued proposal, the sections are integrally related: They share common epistemological assumptions;

Should you conduct this study? Will it be ethical? Will it contribute in some way?

Do you truly want to conduct this study? Are you passionate to learn more about the topic?

research questions and methods chosen to explore the topic are congruent and relate to one another organically.

To achieve this goal, researchers who would conduct qualitative research face several challenges, for example, in

- developing a conceptual framework for the study that is thorough, concise, elegant, and generative;
- planning a design that is systematic and manageable, yet flexible; and
- integrating these into a coherent argument that convinces the proposal readers (a funding agency or dissertation committee) to approve the study.

They should also

- demonstrate their *competence* to conduct the study (introduced above in the “do-ability” considerations),
- depict how they will be mindful about issues of *ethical practice* (introduced above in the “should-do-ability” considerations), and
- provide details of strategies to ensure that the study is *trustworthy*.

Each of these topics is taken up throughout the book (see the overview at the end of this chapter), providing guidance at the proposal development stage to help meet these challenges. In the rest of this chapter, we provide an overview of the need to develop a coherent conceptual framework and a solid design. We then turn to the necessity for the researcher to demonstrate competence to conduct the study.

Conceptual Framework

The first major section of the proposal—the conceptual framework—demands a solid rationale. In examining a specific setting or set of individuals, you should show how you are studying instances of a larger phenomenon. By linking the specific research

questions to larger theoretical constructs, to existing puzzles or contested positions in a field, or to important policy issues, you argue that the particulars of this study serve to illuminate larger issues and therefore hold potential significance for that field. The doctoral student in economics, for example, who demonstrates that qualitative case studies of five families’ financial decision-making are relevant for understanding larger forces

in the marketplace, has met this condition. The case studies are significant because they illuminate in detail larger economic forces while focusing on individuals. We develop the logic undergirding the conceptual framework in Chapter 4.

Design and Methods

The second major section of a proposal, also requiring a sound rationale, is devoted to the design of the study and the selection of specific methods. This section demonstrates

“

Conceptual framework:

Concepts = ideas, constructs.

Framework = structure, organization.

that the study is feasible. You should show that the design and methods are the result of a series of decisions made based on knowledge gained from the methodological literature and previous work. Those decisions should not derive just from the methodological literature, however. Their justification should also flow logically from the research questions and from the conceptual framework.

Because qualitative research proposals are at times unfamiliar to reviewers, the logic supporting the choice of the proposed methods should be sound. Ensuring a clear, logical rationale in support of qualitative methods entails attention to six topics:

1. The *assumptions* of qualitative approaches in general and for the specific genre or hybrid approach of the study
2. The **trustworthiness** of the overall design
3. The *ethical issues* that may arise
4. The *choice of the overall design*, with an accompanying rationale for selecting a site, a sample, the participants, or any combination of these
5. The rationale behind the selection of *specific data collection methods* and how these will help inform the research questions
6. A realistic projection of the *resource needs* to implement the study as planned

To anticipate the overview of the book at the end of this chapter, the first topic is discussed in Chapter 2, trustworthiness and ethics are elaborated in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 takes up the important task of building a conceptual framework, and Chapter 5 discusses design considerations—the *how* of the study. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss a variety of methods for gathering data. Chapter 8 presents ways to describe the researcher's intended approach to data analysis. Chapter 9 offers examples of ways to share what you have learned, whether through a blog, an op-ed piece, a traditional dissertation or scholarly article, or a novel. In addition to these considerations, however, is the crucial need to argue that you are competent to conduct the study, discussed next.

Researcher Competence

Another challenge facing the writer is to demonstrate **researcher competence** explicitly and implicitly. The exact standard of competence used for evaluating the proposal depends on the purpose and scope of the research. Standards applied to a dissertation proposal will likely differ from those used to evaluate a multiyear-funded project written by established researchers. Paradoxically, even though dissertation research is intended to provide an opportunity for learning the craft, all portions of the dissertation proposal will be subjected to careful scrutiny. You will be expected to show your capability by thorough attention to every facet of the conceptual framework and **research design**. Established researchers, on the other hand, may not receive such careful scrutiny because their record of previous work engenders trust and the logic of good faith preserves standards for research. Although this may seem unfair, it nevertheless is the reality of proposal evaluation.

*Design and methods:
How you will implement this
particular study.*

To demonstrate competence, then, you should refer to their previous work and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a pilot study as well as coursework and other relevant education. The high quality of the proposal's organization and its conceptual framework showcases your knowledge of the relevant literature and rigorous research design. All this entails building a well-supported argument that convinces reviewers of the study's importance and soundness.

Developing an Argument

Central to this book is the premise that developing a proposal is a process of building an *argument* that supports the proposal. Like the logic of formal debate or the reasoning in a position paper, a research proposal is intended to convince the reader that the research

“

An argument is your position, your stance, your viewpoint on the topic.

holds potential significance and relevance, that the design of the study is sound, and that the researcher is capable of conducting the study successfully. You should, therefore, build a logical argument for the endeavor, amass evidence in support of each point, and show how the entire enterprise is conceptually integrated. Specifically, “a proposal is an argument *for* your study. It needs to explain the logic

behind the proposed research, rather than simply describe or summarize the study, and to do so in a way that nonspecialists will understand” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 119).

To illuminate this process of building an argument, we offer two vignettes. The first describes a doctoral student in sociology convincing the dissertation committee that qualitative methods are best suited for exploratory research on the culture of a hospital. The student intends to uncover patterns in the work lives of participants that will lead to important improvements in the treatment of patients. Vignette 2 shows researchers building a rationale based on the strengths of qualitative methods for policy analysis. The researchers had to convince legislators that qualitative methods would yield useful, vivid analyses that could inform the policymaking process. Both vignettes are based on experiences of our graduate students. Following the vignettes, we develop the implications for building an argument in support of qualitative proposals and then provide an overview of the rest of the book.

VIGNETTE 2

JUSTIFYING FIELDWORK TO EXPLORE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

As O'Brien reviewed the notes she had written to help with the proposal defense, she realized

that her strongest argument rested on two aspects of the proposed study's significance:

its exploratory purpose and its commitment to improving patient treatment in large urban hospitals. She realized that the latter aspect might be construed as biased, but if she kept the rationale grounded in the need to better understand complex interactions, tacit processes, and often hidden beliefs and values, she could demonstrate the study's clear potential to improve practice.

Her committee was composed of two quantitatively trained sociologists and a medical anthropologist. She knew she had the support of the anthropologist, whose advice had been crucial during the several proposal drafts she had written. The sociologists, however, were more likely to be critical of the design.

O'Brien decided to begin her presentation with an explication of the four purposes of research (exploration, explanation, description, and prediction) to link the purpose of her proposed study to general principles regarding the conduct of inquiry. She could then proceed quite logically to a discussion of the ways exploratory research serves to identify important variables for subsequent explanatory or predictive research. This logic could allay the concerns of the two quantitatively oriented sociologists, who would search the proposal for testable hypotheses, instrumentation

and operationalization of variables, and tests of reliability.

The second major justification of the study would develop from its significance for practice. O'Brien recalled how she had reviewed empirical studies indicating that organizational conditions had a significant effect on wellness and hospital-leaving rates. What had not been identified in those studies were the specific interactions between hospital staff and patients, the widely shared beliefs about patients among the staff, and the organizational norms governing patient treatment. Her research, she would argue, would help identify those tacit, often hidden, aspects of organizational life. This, in turn, could be useful both for policy regarding health care and for practice in health care facilities.

That O'Brien would be engaging in exploratory research where the relevant variables had not been identified and uncovering the tacit aspects of organizational life strongly suggested qualitative methods. Fieldwork would be most appropriate for discovering the relevant variables and building a thorough, rich, detailed description of hospital culture. By linking her proposed research to concepts familiar to the quantitative sociologists, O'Brien hoped to draw the sociologists into the logic supporting her proposal and convince them of its sound design.

A researcher's first task, even before formulating the proposal, is quite often to convince critics that the research has the potential to be useful (for theoretical development in the field, in currents of empirical research, in policy issues, and/or in concerns of practice). O'Brien faced this challenge and developed a rationale supporting the choice of qualitative research methods. In many cases, and especially in policy research, one can appeal to policymakers' frustration with previous research. You should aim to build an argument that may well convince them that qualitative research will lead to strong, detailed conclusions and recommendations. The next vignette, also fictitious, shows how two policy analysts convinced their superiors that they could answer pressing questions with qualitative methods.

VIGNETTE 3

CONVINCING POLICYMAKERS OF THE UTILITY OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Why, 6 months after state legislators had allocated \$10 million to provide temporary shelters, were homeless families still sleeping in cars? Keppel and Wilson, researchers in the legislative analyst's office, knew that the question demanded qualitative research methodology. Convincing their skeptical superiors, however, would be a real challenge. They scoured their texts on research methods, selected convincing phrases and examples, and prepared a memo to demonstrate the viability of qualitative research and build the capacity of the legislative analyst's office in that direction. They argued that, too often, the office's

research and evaluations missed the mark. The memo began with a quote about how an approximate answer to the right question is better than an exact answer to the wrong question. The winning points, though, in their presentation to their superiors related to two major goals. They spoke of needing to discover the right questions to ask so the systematic collection of data would follow. Thus, Keppel and Wilson convinced their superiors that their findings would help define the important questions, describe patterns of implementation, and identify the challenges and barriers that could lead to more effective policy outcomes.

In Vignette 3, we see researchers convincing others that a qualitative study is needed. This underscores the notion that researchers proposing qualitative inquiry do best by emphasizing the promise of quality, depth, and richness in the findings. They may, however, encounter puzzlement and resistance from those accustomed to surveys and quasi-experimental research, and may need to translate between qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Researchers who are convinced that a qualitative approach is best for the research question or problem at hand should make a case that “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 5) and systematic and detailed analysis will yield valuable explanations of processes. Think of having a “**critical friend**” who

can raise tough questions and serve as a sounding board for your thought processes, and help you worry about how any preconceptions might have overly influenced your data collection and analysis. Think of the task of developing a convincing proposal as posing the questions asked by Luker (2008) in her delightful book *Salsa Dancing Into the Social Sciences*:

“

Cultivate critical friends to support you, ask you tough questions, and be there for you.

The one question I *always* try to think about, as I make every single decision in my research, is what would my smartest, nastiest, most skeptical, and meanest colleague think of this particular decision? How can I persuade someone who does not share my taken-for-granted assumptions about the world that my research is valid? (p. 47, emphasis in original)

Fifteen years later, we feel less need to be defensive with such smart and skeptical colleagues. We now push forward, knowing that our holistic inquiries into complexities will yield research that can move people to moral action. As we write, the coronavirus pandemic engulfs the globe, as do its attendant economic devastations. And social justice concerns have overtaken us all with the increasing number of videos, photos, and first-person accounts of police brutality. Police officers face difficult dilemmas as protests over the execution of Black Americans have ripped the very thin veneer off public apathy toward the fear and anguish that many Black Americans live with on a daily basis. Such crises, along with the erosion of polar ice caps, raging forest fires, and devastating hurricanes, call attention to the need for research that enables people to see into the depths of such continually emerging crises. Research needs embodied conceptualizing, not just continuous citing of numbers of deaths, stranded polar bears, wealth gaps, and hungry children. Increasingly, research is conducted in collaboration with **communities of practice**, where, with other scholars and practitioners, members can share worries about “fuzzy problems . . . and, in turn, be open to gentle critical feedback” (Blanco & Rossman, in press). Through such communities of practice and reliance on critical friends, researchers avoid being the lone researcher whose study may be irrelevant and disconnected to practice and real-world significance.

Overview of the Book

This chapter has introduced the key issues and challenges in developing a solid and convincing proposal for qualitative research. Chapter 2 provides brief discussions of several qualitative research genres, including intriguing developments from critical perspectives. We hope this will help you situate your proposal within one of these genres or within some wonderfully hybrid mix.

Because of their continuing importance to the research enterprise, social life, and human well-being, considerations of ethical practice are woven in throughout the book. We discuss ethics in some depth in Chapter 3 but also apply these considerations in the other chapters. In addition, in Chapter 3, we address concerns of ensuring ethical processes and trustworthy, credible qualitative research studies from the proposal stage.

In Chapter 4, we turn to the complex task of building a conceptual framework around the study. This process entails moving beyond the initial puzzle or intriguing paradox by embedding it in appropriate traditions of research—“currents of thought” (Schram, 2006, p. 63)—linking the specific case to larger theoretical domains. This framing should also demonstrate the “problem” that the proposed study will explore, which then links the study to its hoped-for significance for larger social policy issues, concerns of practice, and people’s everyday lives, or some combination of these. Thus, the study’s general focus and research questions, the literature, and the significance of the work are interrelated. We call this the substantive focus of the study—the *what*.

Chapter 5 presents a detailed discussion of the *how* of the study. Having focused on a research topic with a set of questions or a domain to explore, the proposal should describe how systematic inquiry will yield data that will provide answers to the questions. You should discuss the logic and assumptions of the overall design and

methods, linking these directly to the focus of the study and justifying the choice of qualitative methods.

Chapter 6 describes the primary methods of data collection typically used in qualitative inquiry: in-depth interviewing, observation, participant observation, and analyzing artifacts and material cultures, including documents. Chapter 7 offers somewhat more specialized and focused methods that may supplement the primary ones or could be used in and of themselves as the primary method for a particular study. These two chapters are not intended to replace the many exemplary texts that deal in great detail with specific methods; rather, we present brief discussions of various alternatives and discuss the ways they can be generative, as well as noting challenges in their implementation. Chapter 8 describes ways to discuss, in a preliminary manner, how the complicated tasks of managing, recording, and analyzing qualitative data will be accomplished. This discussion is necessarily brief because you cannot specify the exact categories and themes for analysis at the proposal stage, but you can still describe the strategies you will likely use and link these to the conceptual framework.

Chapter 9 revisits the idea of the proposal as an argument, demonstrating precedents and strategies for writing up or presenting research with the central notion of audience. We also return to the key considerations of trustworthiness discussed in Chapter 3 and offer strategies for evaluating the soundness and competence of a qualitative proposal, with special attention to building a logical rationale and answering challenges from critics.

Throughout the book, we use vignettes to illustrate our points. Many are drawn from our own work and that of other social scientists; some have been written by our graduate students, and they are given full credit in those instances. The principles depicted in the vignettes apply to research grounded in several disciplines as well as in the applied fields; they challenge you to apply them to your own design.

Three themes run through this book. The first is that **design flexibility** is a crucial feature of qualitative inquiry, even though demands for specificity in design and method seem to preclude such flexibility. We urge you to think of the proposal as an initial plan—one that is thorough, sound, well thought out, and based on current knowledge. The proposal demonstrates your sensitivity to the setting, the issues to be explored, and the ethical dilemmas sure to be encountered, but it also reminds the reader that considerations as yet unforeseen (Milner, 2007) may well dictate changes in this initial plan. Therefore, the language used in discussing the design and methods is sure, positive, and active, while you reserve the right to modify what is currently proposed.

The second theme, which we have already introduced, is the **proposal as an argument**. Because its primary purpose is to convince the reader that the research shows promise of being substantive and will likely contribute to the field, that it is well conceived, and that you are capable of carrying it through, the proposal should rely on reasoning and evidence sufficient to convince the reader. The logic undergirding it should be carefully argued. All this will demonstrate a thorough knowledge of both the topic to be explored and the methods to be used. At times, we give guidance and use terminology that should assist in translating qualitative design assumptions for more quantitatively oriented audiences. In describing the proposal as an argument, we often mention the reader of the proposal to remind you, the reader of this book, that a sense of audience is critical in crafting a solid research proposal.

And the third theme is **collaboration**. Over the years, all three of us have experienced wonderfully generative, sometimes contentious, collaborative relationships with critical friends. Our work is enriched through these relationships; we therefore encourage you to create a community of practice with thoughtful critical friends who can ask you the sorts of tough questions noted above in the quote from Luker.

Toward the end of most chapters, you will find a dialogue between two of our former graduate students. We hope these dialogues provide a model of the kind of dialogues you might have with your critical friends or community of practice. The dialogue participants, Karla Guiliano Sarr and Keren Dalyot, were our graduate students as we wrote the sixth edition of *Designing Qualitative Research*. Karla is now an independent international consultant working on research and evaluation projects. Keren is a researcher in the Applied Science Communication Research Group with the Faculty in Education in Science and Technology, Technion, Israel. With their approval, we have slightly edited their original dialogues.

Also, we provide application activities throughout various chapters and sometimes as a culminating activity at the end of a chapter (as we do in this chapter). We also offer books and articles for further reading, with a short list of “some of our favorites and classics,” and key terms at the end of each chapter.

Opportunities and Challenges

The opportunities and challenges ahead of you as you undertake learning about—and doing—qualitative inquiry are exciting, exhausting, inspiring, and . . . just plain old hard work. Much is learned, we believe, by experience; so be gentle with yourself as you undertake to learn and practice both the “science” and the art of conducting useful, ethical, engaging qualitative research. The application activity below is intended to help you learn about yourself as a qualitative inquirer, directing you to areas where you might seek out support and further learning opportunities.

APPLICATION ACTIVITY 1.1

WHAT DO I BRING TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH? WHAT ELSE SHOULD I LEARN?

Read through the list of skills and personal dispositions below, asking yourself, “What do I already seem to have? And what else should I learn about?” Take at least 30 minutes to ponder the skills and dispositions, noting where you believe you have some strengths and where you might need further support. When you are done, share with your trusted critical friends to help you refine your initial judgments. It might

be interesting to engage with these ideas now, as you embark on your learning, and then again when you complete a course or a small-scale study. Then compare.

Remember: This activity is intended to help you identify areas of strength (which you could share with others) and areas that might need some support (which you could obtain from your critical friends). **Be kind to yourself!**

(Continued)

(Continued)

Skills:

1. Listening skills
2. Memory for details and names
3. Ability to write clearly
4. Diligence in recording data
5. Comfort and ease in writing reports
6. Ease in navigating unstructured situations
7. Ability to assume a nonjudgmental and nonpartisan stance
8. Analytic skills in seeking how data fit into a theoretical structure
9. Diligence in not distorting data by imposing your preferred conceptual framework
10. Ability to analyze data (i.e., to think about the larger research questions while actually implementing the study)
11. Comfort working with some degree of independence
12. Ability to observe a situation while involved in that situation
13. Flexibility in recording data (i.e., ability to operate from memory and by taking full notes)

14. Awareness of alternative techniques of data collection with no emotional investment in any one method
15. Willingness to keep wondering what is going on

Dispositions:

1. Ability and willingness to reflect on your feelings
2. Ability to be a respectful onlooker
3. Ease and comfort in relating with those *not* of your own social class, race or ethnicity, gender, or age
4. Comfort approaching total strangers and engaging in a wide variety of small talk
5. Ease in helping participants feel comfortable with you
6. Satisfaction in being with, listening to, and trying to understand others' experiences
7. Comfort in taking a passive role
8. Sensitivity to when a discussion could be disturbing to participants

In sum, qualitative researchers strive to be humble, modest, and curious about the individuals in the study while holding to standards of integrity, respect, and empathy.

Further Reading

Introductions to Qualitative Research

Barbour, R. (2013). *Introducing qualitative research: A student's guide to the craft of doing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Durdella, N. (2019). *Qualitative dissertation methodology: A guide for research design and methods*. SAGE.

Flick, U. (2020). *An introduction to qualitative research* (6th ed.). SAGE.

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Padgett, D. (2017). *Qualitative methods in social work research*. SAGE.

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (2017). *An introduction to qualitative research: Learning in the field* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Some of Our Favorites and Classics

Janesick, V. J. (2016). *“Stretching” exercises for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Luker, K. (2008). *Salsa dancing into the social sciences: Research in an age of info-glut*. Harvard University Press.

Schram, T. H. (2006). *Conceptualizing and proposing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Pearson Prentice Hall.

Key Concepts

collaboration 15

communities of practice 13

conceptual framework 7

critical friend 12

design flexibility 14

do-ability 6

ethical research practice 3

proposal as an argument 14

research design 9

researcher competence 9

should-do-ability 6

trustworthiness 9

want-to-do-ability 6

Do not copy, post, or distribute