Qualitative Inquiry in Practice: Different Approaches to Qualitative Research and a Practical Guide to Selecting One[1]

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Qualitative Inquiry in Practice is a series of publications providing an overview of qualitative research and its application. The series is intended for a broader audience, including Extension professionals, students, early-career researchers, and educators, among many others. It addresses the gap of practice-oriented resources on the practice of qualitative research. The first EDIS publication, "Qualitative Inquiry in Practice: Introduction to Qualitative Research," provided a general explanation of qualitative inquiry, its application in research studies, key features, and strengths and limitations. This second publication in the *Qualitative Inquiry in Practice* EDIS series presents an overview of six common approaches to qualitative research and provides practical examples that can help you identify the best approach for your study.

Why use a specific approach?

When conducting a qualitative inquiry, identifying the specific qualitative approach is a key decision you must make. Usually, the decision to use an approach is made based on the research question, target audience, time and resource availability, and the experience of the researcher (Creswell, 2013). Selecting a suitable qualitative approach provides a plan and outlines a process for the research, including clarifying the assumptions involved and the methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Researchers with advanced skills in qualitative research might combine two or more approaches if appropriate. This is usually done to gain a deeper understanding of the context or to answer complex research questions where using one approach might be insufficient. However, for novice researchers, it is recommended to choose a single approach — normally, the generalized qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013). The number of qualitative approaches varies according to different scholars. Here, we describe six approaches as explained by Creswell (2013) and Yin (2016) with relevant examples for their application, and we also list a few other approaches described by Saldaña and Omasta (2016). Table 1 provides a list of qualitative approaches with brief

descriptions of when to use them, methods of data collection, and research examples. Figure 1 presents a decision flowchart for choosing a qualitative approach for your study.
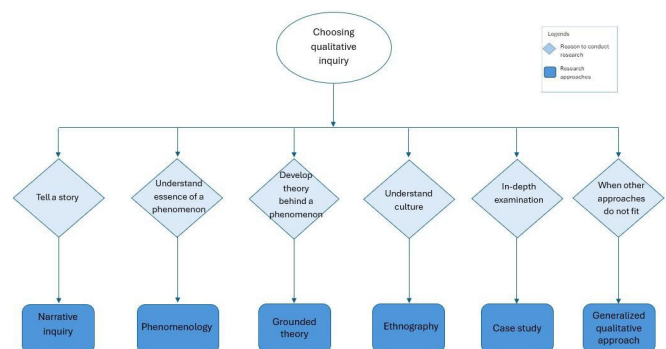

Figure 1. Decision flowchart for choosing qualitative approaches.
Credit: Arati Joshi, Sebastian Galindo, Dharmendra Kalauni, Caitlin E. Lunzmann, and Shane T. Michael, UF/IFAS

Approaches to Qualitative Research

Narrative Inquiry

In this approach, the stories and experiences of participants are collected through interviews and archival documents, and through narrative or thematic analyses, the participants' stories and experiences are broken apart and rearranged chronologically and/or thematically to form a new story (Creswell, 2013). Because the researcher develops stories from collected data, the narrative approach is also called "creative nonfiction" (Saldaña, 2011). This approach assumes that humans are storytelling individuals who share their life experiences through stories and lead a storied life (Connolly & Clandinin, 1990). Using narrative inquiry, researchers try to understand how individuals articulate their experiences. The created stories can be individual (representing the experience of one participant) or collective (representing the experiences of multiple participants). Story development can be a one-way process, where the participant shares a narrative and the researcher portrays

it. Story development can also be the result of a collaborative development process in which participant(s) and researcher(s) co-construct the narrative through dialogue.

To understand the application of narrative inquiry, consider this example: COVID-19 brought significant changes to interactions between Extension professionals and clients. A researcher might be interested in learning about the experience of Extension professionals in responding to clients when strict stay-at-home orders were enforced. Using a narrative research approach, a researcher could interview a few Extension professionals regarding their experiences during the lockdown to learn their stories. Alternatively, a researcher could interview all the Extension professionals in a county and review their reports of accomplishments (ROA) to learn how that county responded to clients and develop a collective story.

The selection of the number of participants, the development of individual or collective stories, the methods for data collection and analysis, and the story formation process depend on the research question, time, and resources available to the researcher. Participants may share in their narratives lived experiences (i.e., what they had personally experienced firsthand) and/or told experiences (i.e., what they have heard about from another person).

Phenomenology

Using this approach, a researcher tries to understand "what" the participants experienced and "how" they experienced it, focusing especially on describing and/or understanding the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher aims to describe the meaning of a particular lived experience for the participants (Bhattacharya, 2017) and "how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2015, p. 190). Researchers collect data primarily through in-depth interviews with several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest to understand the essential cognitive and emotional processes associated with the phenomenon. Unlike narrative research, data are collected only from individuals with the lived experience of interest (Saldaña, 2011). The experience can be an emotion (e.g., grief, feelings associated with parenthood, etc.); an identity (e.g., farmer, policymaker, etc.); an experience with a program, organization, or culture; or a combination of any of the former (e.g., the experience of members of underrepresented groups as undergraduate students within an engineering program) (Patton, 2015).

Consider this example: A new Extension professional is hired to promote small farms and local agribusiness. The Extension professional is new to the area and does not know the local culture of farming and the customer preferences for local agricultural products.

A phenomenological approach can be used in this instance to understand the experiences of Extension professionals who are working in a new location that has a different culture of production and marketing. A phenomenological approach can be taken to understand the process of a new Extension agent adjusting to the unique culture and professional setting.

By conducting in-depth interviews with a few Extension professionals, qualitative researchers could learn about the emotions and experiences that Extension agents go through during the processes of understanding the culture and developing relationships with clients.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory approach is used to generate a theory about the processes or actions that describe and/or explain how a specific phenomenon works. This is especially useful for topics or areas that are underexplored or unknown. Glaser and Strauss (1965) proposed this approach and used it to describe the theory of dying, a study that was conducted with terminally ill patients. However, other scholars have modified the grounded theory methodology from its original positivistic origins into a constructivist approach (Charmaz, 2006). In this approach, the researcher grounds their explanation and theory in the data collected from the participants (Creswell, 2013) and "lifts the veil" (p. 183) from the activity or structure of inquiry (Patton, 2015), thus describing the phenomenon using the developed theory. There are specific steps that are related to grounded theory (e.g., unique coding process, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, etc.).

For example, a researcher is interested in understanding how Extension professionals in Florida cope with stress. For this, the researcher would interview a large number of Extension professionals as well as conduct theoretical sampling to understand the process of stress management. Other forms of data collection also are considered, such as focus groups and surveys. The collected data are concurrently analyzed, which provides direction for future data collection efforts. This process continues until a theoretical saturation is reached and all the collected data are analyzed through a constant comparative method, where small data units are constantly compared across cases to understand the pattern. In this way, a theory is developed.

Ethnography

Through ethnography, the meaning of behavior, interaction, rituals, language, beliefs, and everyday activities of a defined culture-sharing group is identified (Creswell, 2013). The researcher needs to be immersed in the culture for a prolonged period to document the routine and significant activities of the culture (Bhattacharya, 2017). A large amount of data is collected through observations, informal interactions with participants, in-

depth conversations with participants, reviewing artifacts and archival materials, and reflective journaling. This approach requires intensive fieldwork to engage with the participants for an extended period and gain an insider perspective of the culture (Patton, 2015). Jeffrey and Troman (2004) described three ways of doing ethnography: a compressed timed mode (a few days to a month), selective intermittent time mode (2 months to 3 years), and recurrent time mode (recurrent data collection over time). The compressed time mode aims to collect data for broad familiarization, while selective intermittent time mode is used to investigate a specific area. Along with these two objectives, the recurrent time mode compares data with the previous research visit to identify similarities and differences (Jeffrey & Troman, 2004).

Suppose a researcher is interested in understanding how immigrant farmworkers who do not speak English navigate their work in the United States. Through an ethnographic study, a qualitative researcher would immerse themselves in the farmworkers' environment, spending time to observe their daily routines and interactions. Researchers would seek to understand the ways these workers communicate with others, the challenges posed by language barriers, their motivations for choosing this job, and other factors influencing their work directly and indirectly. This helps to uncover the cultural, social, and economic factors influencing the farmworkers' experiences.

Case Study
Case study approaches are used to gain an in-depth understanding of a single case or multiple cases (Creswell, 2013). Predetermined scope or parameters are used to select cases, usually bound by location or time (Creswell, 2013; Bhattacharya, 2017). Researchers prefer to select current and real-life cases to collect accurate information. The selection of case(s) can be done deliberately (e.g., choosing a case with unique characteristics), strategically (e.g., choosing a typical case), or purposively (e.g., for convenience) (Saldaña, 2011). Yin (2003) describes that case (unit of analysis) selection is dependent on the research question and each case "would call for slightly different research design and data collection strategy" (p. 25). Usually, multiple forms of data collection, such as interviews, observations, documents, and reports, are used to gain an in-depth understanding of the chosen case(s).

Consider this example: A county in Florida installed an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot that can answer phone calls and respond to clients' questions regarding various issues. This has significantly reduced the workload of Extension professionals in that county, allowing them to focus on work that requires field visits and one-on-one consultations. Using a case study approach, the outcomes of the installation of the AI chatbot could be explored. Data could be collected from clients to understand their experiences and challenges; from Extension professionals

and other county staff regarding the efficiency of the chatbot; and from administrative staff to understand the maintenance requirements and challenges they face. The data could be collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Generalized Qualitative Approach or Pragmatic Approach
Sometimes it is difficult to fit qualitative research into one of the five approaches described above. In such situations, a robust qualitative inquiry can still be conducted without strictly adhering to any of the specified approaches (Yin, 2016). For that to happen, researchers should be aware of the pros and cons of various methods to qualitative research and should select the most appropriate method to answer their particular research question (Barker & Pistrang, 2021). Terms such as generalized qualitative research study, pragmatic approach, field-based study, and pragmatic pluralistic approach have been used to describe qualitative research that does not follow a specific approach (Barker & Pistrang, 2021; Ramanadhan et al., 2021; Yin, 2016). Rather, qualitative approaches and methods are adapted based on research purposes.

Other Considerations for Choosing a Suitable Qualitative Approach
Besides the purpose of research, factors such as study timeline, budget and resource availability, data constraints, and the audience of the study can influence the use of a specific qualitative approach (Bamberger et al., 2012). Careful strategies and activities should be considered to address these constraints. Some of these strategies could include looking for an economical way of data collection (e.g., virtual interviews or focus groups), working with a small sample, using convenience sampling, rationalizing data needs (i.e., what is needed and what is nice to have) (Bamberger et al., 2012), or taking a pragmatic approach to analyzing the data (i.e., by borrowing strategies from more than one known qualitative approach) (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Green and Thorogood (2018) even suggested that flexibility in a study's design is critical to qualitative research. In order to appropriately adjust a study's design, the factors below should be considered (Green & Thorogood, 2018; Patton, 2014).

- The study's purpose and subject matter
- Demographics of the audience
- Criteria to judge both the quality and practical application of results
- Research context (setting, participants, investigators)
- Available resources
- Access to participants

All these factors may impact how an approach is selected or modified to best suit a study. A clear and logical reason should be provided in the research manuscript to support the rationale for making the modification (Bamberger et

al., 2012). Additionally, researchers should not compromise the rigor and quality of the research when doing generalized qualitative research. For this, it is recommended to triangulate the research findings, include a reflexivity statement in the research, do peer-debriefing and member checking, and consider negative and divergent cases (Ramanadhan et al., 2021). Upcoming publications in this EDIS series will provide a detailed discussion of all these activities to ensure the credibility, rigor, and quality of qualitative research.

Examples of Qualitative Approaches

Table 1 describes when it is appropriate to use the previously mentioned qualitative approaches, as well as recommended ways to collect data for each type of approach. It also includes relevant research examples of each type of approach.

Additional Approaches

In addition to these six approaches, Saldaña (2011) describes other approaches, referring to them as genres of qualitative research. Some of these include content analysis, poetic inquiry, arts-based research, investigative journalism, and critical inquiry.

Application of Different Approaches to One Topic

Any approach could be applied to a particular research topic. The selection of the approach should be driven by the questions the researcher wants to answer about that topic. For example, consider the relationship between Extension professionals and clients. Using a narrative approach, the experiences of a new Extension professional in Florida, including their challenges in understanding and adjusting to the new culture, adapting, and efforts to develop relationships with clients, could be explored. Through phenomenology, Extension professionals' experiences building client relationships could be examined. A grounded theory study might explain the processes of building relationships. An ethnographic study could explore the cultural context in which day-to-day interactions occur. Using a case study approach, the strategies experienced Extension professionals use to build relationships with clients belonging to marginalized communities could be explored.

A future publication in the *Qualitative Inquiry in Practice* series on EDIS will provide more information on understanding the sampling process in qualitative research and the number of participants for each approach.

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Table 1. Different qualitative research approaches.

	When to Use	**How to Collect Data**	**Recommended Readings**
Narrative inquiry	Tell the participant's story	Interviews	Kim, J. (2016). *Understanding narrative inquiry*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071802861 Mertova, P., & Webster, L. (2020). *Using narrative inquiry as a research method: An introduction to critical event narrative analysis in research, teaching and professional practice*. Routledge.
Phenomenology	Describe and/or understand the essence of a phenomenon	In-depth interviews	Beck, C. (2021). *Introduction to phenomenology: Focus on methodology*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071909669 Dibley, L., Dickerson, S., Duffy, M., & Vandermause, R. (2020). *Doing hermeneutic phenomenological research: a practical guide*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529799583 Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412995658 Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2021). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* (Second edition).
Grounded theory	Develop/articulate the theory behind a phenomenon	Interviews, focus groups, survey	Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London. Sage. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
Ethnography	Understand culture	Prolonged data collection through observation, key informant interview, informal conversation, reflective journaling	Atkinson, P. (2022). *Crafting ethnography*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529682670 Fetterman, D. (Ed.). (2020). *Ethnography: Step-by-step*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071909874 Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
Case study	Perform an in-depth examination of people, groups of people, or an organization	Interviews, observation, documents, reports	Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.
Generalized qualitative approach	When other approaches do not fit to answer the research question or when conducting research has some form of constraints (e.g., time, resources, financial)	Several methods are used to answer the research question	Harding, J. (2018). *Qualitative data analysis from start to finish* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Saldaña, J., & Omasta, M. (2022). *Qualitative research: Analyzing life* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Yin, R. K. (2016). *Qualitative research from start to finish* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

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