

# 4



## Five Qualitative Traditions of Inquiry

The five articles described in the preceding section provide examples of the varieties of qualitative research. Hopefully, the reader can see that research in the five traditions differs in form, terms, and focus. In this chapter, I add other dimensions for distinguishing among the five traditions of inquiry. For each tradition, I pose a definition, briefly trace its history, explore variants, introduce procedures involved in conducting a study, and indicate potential challenges in using the tradition.

### Questions for Discussion

- ▼ How is each of the five traditions defined, what is its origin, what variants exist in the approach, what procedures are used, and what challenges exist in applying it?

### A BIOGRAPHY

A **biographical study** is the study of *an individual* and her or his experiences as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material. Denzin (1989a) defines the biographical method as the "studied use and collection of life documents that describe turning-point moments in an individual's life" (p. 69). These accounts explore

lesser lives, great lives, thwarted lives, lives cut short, or lives miraculous in their unapplauded achievement (Heilbrun, 1988). Regardless of the type of life, I use the term *biography* to denote the broad genre of biographical writings (Smith, 1994) that includes individual biographies, autobiographies, life histories, and oral histories. I also rely on Denzin's (1989a) approach to biography, called an **interpretive biography**, because the writer tells and inscribes the *stories* of others: "We create the persons we write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices" (p. 82).

Biographical writing has roots in different disciplines and has found renewed interest in recent years. The intellectual strands of this tradition are found in literary, historical, anthropological, psychological, and sociological perspectives as well as in interdisciplinary views from feminist and cultural thinking (see Smith, 1994, who discusses these variants).

My particular interest is in exploring the sociological perspective, and thus I rely on writers such as Plummer (1983) and especially Denzin (1989a, 1989b). Evoking a "baseline" from the humanities, Plummer (1983), for example, discusses the evolution of "documents of life" research from the great literary works of Dostoevski, Dickens, Balzac, and Austen with a focus on human-centered research. Plummer ties biographical writings to the early works of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s through works such as Thomas and Znaniecki's (1958) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, a study of some 2,200 pages of Polish immigrants to Chicago. Other books are instrumental across anthropology, psychology, and sociology in laying the foundation for social science biographical writing such as Dollard's (1935) *Criteria for the Life History*, the psychological approaches in Allport's (1942) *The Uses of Personal Documents in Psychological Science* and, more recently, Edel's (1984) *Writing Lives* and anthropologist Langness's (1965) *The Life History in Anthropological Science*. I could mention many other authors who have influenced biographical writing in the social sciences in general and in sociology in particular (Smith, 1994); however, in my biographical discussions, I rely on Denzin (1989a), who not only constructs the classical approach to biography but also espouses an interpretive approach.

Procedurally, then, a qualitative researcher faces several decisions in undertaking a biographical type of study (and I would not go so far as to imply an order to these decisions). The first issue is to select the type of biographical study to be undertaken. Denzin (1989a) reviews the various types and their characteristics. Although biographical forms of research vary and the terms reflect different discipline perspectives, all forms represent an attempt to construct the history of a life.

- In a **biographical study**, the life story of an individual is written by someone other than the individual being studied using archival documents and records (Denzin, 1989a). Subjects of biographies may be living or deceased. Throughout this book, I focus attention on this form because of its popularity with graduate students and social and human science writers.
- In an **autobiography**, the life story is written by persons about themselves (Angrosino, 1989a). This form seldom is found in graduate student research.
- Another form, the **life history**, is an approach found in the social sciences and anthropology where a researcher reports on an individual's life and how it reflects cultural themes of the society, personal themes, institutional themes, and social histories (Cole, 1994). The investigator collects data primarily through interviews and conversations with the individual (see Bailey, 1978; Geiger, 1986). For a sociological definition, Plummer (1983) states that a life history is "the full length book's account of one person's life in his or her own words. Usually, it will be gathered over a number of years with gentle guidance from the social scientist, the subject either writing down episodes of life or tape recording them. At its best, it will be backed up with intensive observation of the subject's life, interviews with friends and perusals of letters and photographs" (p. 14).
- An **oral history** is an approach in which the researcher gathers personal recollections of events, their causes, and their effects from an individual or several individuals. This information may be collected through tape recordings or through written works of individuals who have died or who are still living.

In addition to these broader forms, specific biographies may be written "objectively," with little researcher interpretation; "scholarly," with a strong historical background of the subject and a chronological organization; "artistically," from the perspective of presenting details in a lively and interesting manner; or in a "narrative" form, a fictionalized account of scenes and characters (Smith, 1994).

One needs to decide whether he or she is going to approach the biography from the more classical traditional stance (Denzin, 1970; Helling, 1988; Plummer, 1983) or from the interpretive approach (Denzin, 1989a, 1989b). In a *classical biography*, the researcher uses statements about theory, concerns with validity and criticism of documents and materials, and the formulation of distinct hypotheses, all drawn from the perspective of the researcher (Denzin, 1989a). The *interpretive biography*, my preferred approach to biographical writing, operates on an entirely different set of assumptions and is well identified in a slim volume by Denzin (1989a) on *Interpretive Biography*. This form of biographical writing challenges the traditional approaches and asks that biographers be cognizant of how studies are both read and written.

In the interpretive view, biographies are, in part, written autobiographies of the writers, thus blurring the lines between fact and fiction and leading the authors to "create" the subject in the text. Biographers cannot partial out their own biases and values; thus, biographies become gendered class productions reflecting the lives of the writers. These points, Denzin (1989a) alleges, need to be acknowledged by the biographers and reflected in the written biographies.

▼ Given these central assumptions, Denzin (1989a) advances several procedural steps:

1. The investigator begins with an objective set of experiences in the subject's life noting *life course stages and experiences*. The stages may be childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, or old age, written as a *chronology*, or as experiences such as education, marriage, and employment.
2. Next, the researcher gathers concrete contextual biographical materials using interviewing (e.g., the subject recounts a set of life experiences in the form of a story or narrative). Thus, a focus is on gathering *stories*.

3. These stories are organized around themes that indicate pivotal events (or *epiphanies*) in an individual's life.
4. The researcher explores the meaning of these *stories*, relying on the individual to provide explanations and searching for multiple meanings.
5. The researcher also looks for larger structures to explain the meanings, such as social interactions in groups, cultural issues, ideologies, and *historical context*, and provides an interpretation for the life experiences of the individual (or cross-interpretations if several individuals are studied).

▼ Given these procedures and the characteristics of a biography, it is challenging for the following reasons:

- The researcher needs to collect extensive information from and about the subject of the biography.
- The investigator needs to have a clear understanding of historical, contextual material to position the subject within the larger trends in society or in the culture.
- It takes a keen eye to determine the particular *stories*, slant, or angle that "works" in writing a biography and to uncover the "figure under the carpet" (Edel, 1984) that explains the multilayered context of a life.
- The writer, using an interpretive approach, needs to be able to bring himself or herself into the narrative and acknowledge his or her standpoint.

## A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Whereas a biography reports the life of a *single individual*, a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning of the *lived experiences* for several individuals about a concept or *the phenomenon*. Phenomenologists explore the structures of consciousness in human experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). It has roots in the *philosophical perspectives* of

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and philosophical discussions to follow by Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982), and it has been used in the social and human sciences, especially in sociology (Borgatta & Borgatta, 1992; Swingewood, 1991), psychology (Giorgi, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1989, 1994), nursing and the health sciences (Nieswiadomy, 1993; Oiler, 1986), and education (Tesch, 1988).

The history of phenomenology starts with German mathematician Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and his extensive writings addressing phenomenological philosophy from 1913 until his retirement (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). Husserl's ideas are abstract, and, as late as 1945, Merleau-Ponty (1962) raises the question "What is phenomenology?" in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. In fact, Husserl is known to call any project currently under way "phenomenology" (Natanson, 1973).

Husserl emphasizes many points (Moustakas, 1994; Natanson, 1973). Researchers search for the *essential, invariant structure (or essence)* or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the *intentionality of consciousness* where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning. *Phenomenological data analysis* proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings. The researcher also sets aside all prejudgments, *bracketing* (see *epoche*) his or her experiences (a return to "natural science") and relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience. From these philosophical tenets, four themes are discernible (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990):

1. *A return to the traditional tasks of philosophy.* By the end of the 19th century, philosophy had become limited to exploring a world by empirical means, called "scientism." The return to the traditional tasks of philosophy is a return to the Greek conception of philosophy as a search for wisdom before philosophy became enamored with empirical science.
2. *A philosophy without presuppositions.* Phenomenology's approach is to suspend all judgments about what is real—the "natural attitude"—until they are founded on a more certain basis. This suspension is called *epoche* by Husserl.

3. *The intentionality of consciousness.* This idea is that consciousness always is directed toward an object. Reality of an object, then, is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it. Thus, reality, according to Husserl, is not divided into subjects and objects, thus shifting the Cartesian duality to the meaning of an object that appears in consciousness.
4. *The refusal of the subject-object dichotomy.* This theme flows naturally from the *intentionality of consciousness*. The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual.

The individuals who embrace these tenets and carry them forward in intellectual thought come from many social science areas, especially sociology and psychology, and form different philosophical camps such as reflective/transcendental phenomenology, dialogical phenomenology, empirical phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology, and social phenomenology (Barritt, 1986; Tesch, 1990). I briefly mention social phenomenology and focus attention on psychological phenomenology as expressed through empirical/*transcendental phenomenology*.

The sociological perspective, social phenomenology, owes much to Schutz, who articulates the essence of phenomenology for studying social acts (Swingewood, 1991). Schutz is interested in how ordinary members of society constitute the world of everyday life, especially how individuals consciously develop meaning out of social interactions (people interacting with each other). As an extension of Schutz's thinking, a man by the name of Garfinkel calls this approach "ethnomethodology," a way in which to examine how individuals in society make meanings of their everyday lives. Often drawing on ethnography and cultural themes, ethnomethodology relies on methods of analyzing everyday talk (Swingewood, 1991).

My preferred approach, the *psychological approach*, also focuses on the meaning of experiences but has found individual experiences, not group experiences, central. Coming from the Duquesne Studies in Phenomenology, the central tenets of this thinking are

to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in

other words, the essences of structures of the experience. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13)

Moustakas (1994) proceeds to elaborate on a type of phenomenology, **transcendental phenomenology**, that traces back to Husserl but places more emphasis on bracketing out preconceptions (**epoche or bracketing**) and developing universal structures based on what people experience and how.

The conduct of psychological phenomenology has been addressed in a number of writings including Dukes (1984), Tesch (1990), Giorgi (1985, 1994), Polkinghorne (1989), and, most recently, Moustakas (1994), and there is general consensus about how to proceed (Oiler, 1986). But these methods, "based on phenomenological principles . . . function as general guidelines or outlines, and researchers are expected to develop plans of study especially suited to understanding the particular experiential phenomenon that is the object of their study" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 44). With this caveat in mind, I summarize the major procedural issues in using phenomenology:

- ▼ *The researcher needs to understand the **philosophical perspectives** behind the approach, especially the concept of studying how people experience a phenomenon.* The concept of **epoche** is central, where the researcher brackets his or her own preconceived ideas about **the phenomenon** to understand it through the voices of the informants (Field & Morse, 1985).
- ▼ *The investigator writes research questions that explore the meaning of that experience for individuals and asks individuals to describe their everyday **lived experiences**.*
- ▼ *The investigator then collects data from individuals who have experienced **the phenomenon** under investigation.* Typically, this information is collected through long interviews (augmented with researcher self-reflection and previously developed descriptions from artistic works) with informants ranging in number from 5 to 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989).
- ▼ *The **phenomenological data analysis** steps are generally similar for all psychological phenomenologists who discuss the methods.* According to Moustakas (1994) and Polkinghorne (1989), all psychological phenomenologists employ a similar series of steps. The original

protocols are divided into statements or **horizontalization**. Then, the units are transformed into **clusters of meanings** expressed in psychological and phenomenological concepts. Finally, these transformations are tied together to make a general description of the experience, the **textural description** of what was experienced and the **structural description** of how it was experienced. Some phenomenologists vary this approach by incorporating personal meaning of the experience (Moustakas, 1994), by using single-subject analysis before intersubject analysis, and by analyzing the role of the context in the process (Giorgi, 1975).

- ▼ *The phenomenological report ends with the reader understanding better the **essential, invariant structure (or essence)** of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists.* For example, this means that all experiences have an underlying "structure" (grief is the same whether the loved one is a puppy, a parakeet, or a child). The reader of the report should come away with the feeling that "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46). The actual format for the report might follow Moustakas's (1994) outline of the phenomenological model or chapters in a phenomenological study.

A **phenomenological study** may be challenging to use for the following reasons:

- The researcher requires a solid grounding in the philosophical precepts of phenomenology.
- The participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have experienced **the phenomenon**.
- Bracketing personal experiences by the researcher may be difficult.
- The researcher needs to decide how and in what way his or her personal experiences will be introduced into the study.

## A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

Although a phenomenological study emphasizes the meaning of an experience for a number of individuals, the intent of a **grounded theory**