Unit 6
Qualitative Methods: General Qualitative Inquiry, Grounded Theory, and Phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

The first three types of qualitative research we will review in depth are *generic qualitative inquiry, grounded theory,* and *phenomenology*. The following is excerpted from *Qualitative Research Approaches in Psychology* by William Percy and Kim Kostere (2008).

GENERIC QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

Generic qualitative inquiry investigates people's reports of their subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in their outer world. It can be selected as the methodological approach when:

1. The research problem and question require a qualitative or mixed-methods methodology.
2. Ethnography, grounded theory, or phenomenology is inappropriate because the focus of the study, the content of the information desired, or the kind of data to be obtained do not fit those approaches.
3. The researcher has a body of pre-knowledge/pre-understandings about the topic that he or she wants to be able to more fully describe from the participants' perspective.

DATA COLLECTION METHODS IN GENERIC QUALITATIVE INQUIRY RESEARCH

Data collection in this approach typically uses data collection methods that elicit people's reports on their ideas about things that are outside themselves. However, its focus is on real events and issues means it seldom uses unstructured data collection methods. Instead, it requires semi-or fully-structured interviews, questionnaires, surveys, content- or activity-specific participant observation, and the like. The core focus is external, real worlds, as opposed to internal, psychological, and subjective.

By and large, generic qualitative data collection seeks information from representative samples of people about real-world events and processes, or about their experiences. We want less to "go deep" and more to get a broad range of opinions, ideas, or reflections.

GENERIC QUALITATIVE INQUIRY DATA ANALYSIS METHODS AND PROCEDURES: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

"Thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set—be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts—to find repeated patterns of meanings" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 86).

Thematic analysis is a process used to conduct an analysis of qualitative data. While it does not represent a complete research methodology, it does offer a method of data analysis that is flexible and compatible with many approaches to qualitative research and mixed methodology in particular generic qualitative analysis.

Thematic analysis can be used to analyze data collected through a qualitative survey to investigate subjective experiences of objective things.

There are three main types of generic thematic analysis: inductive analysis, theoretical analysis, and thematic analysis with constant comparison.

GROUNDED THEORY

Grounded theory is a qualitative research approach that attempts to develop theories of understanding based on data from the real world. Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) has its origins in symbolic interactionism, taking the perspective that reality is negotiated between people, always changing, and constantly evolving. The key word is *theory*, which in science means an explanatory statement or model based on research evidence. Unlike some other forms of qualitative inquiry, grounded theory attempts to go beyond rich **description** (which it also strives for) to an **explanation** of the phenomena of interest.

The second key word is *grounded*. This implies that the explanation is derived from the "ground," the actual experiences, words, behaviors, and other data obtained from people directly involved or engaged in the topic. For example, if one wished to derive a grounded theory about the effects of childhood abuse on adult functioning, one would gather many kinds of data from persons who had grown up amid child abuse, and would build the theory of how it affects adult development on the information obtained from those people. Another unique feature of grounded theory is its tendency to "return" to the ground by taking preliminary insights back to the participants and asking them to further comment on and refine the researcher's conclusions.

The primary tools of discovery are interviews and observations. However, grounded theory goes beyond the descriptive and interpretive goals and is aimed at building theories. The ultimate goal of this approach is to derive theories that are grounded in (based on) reality, that is, grounded in the data collected from people actually involved in the issues under investigation. A grounded theory is one that is uncovered, developed, and conditionally confirmed through collecting and making sense of data related to the issue at hand. The hope is that such theories will lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest and to ideas of exerting some control over the phenomenon. Although grounded theory is designed to be a precise rigorous process, creativity plays an important part in that process in that the formulations of the data—"to create new order out of old." The use of literature also differs in the grounded theory approach. There is a recommendation against knowing the literature too well before using this approach because knowing the categories, classifications, and conclusions of previous researchers may constrain your creativity in finding new formulas.

Data Collection Methods in Grounded Theory Research

The dominant methods of data collection in grounded theory research are interviews (usually audio-taped), participant and non-participant observations, conversations recorded in diaries, field notes, descriptions of comparative instances, and personal experience. As mentioned, the participants in a grounded theory study often will be interviewed more than once, and asked to reflect on and refine the preliminary conclusions drawn by the researcher. In an analogy to "hypothesis testing" procedures in quantitative analysis, grounded theorists will often test their theories by re-interviewing participants about them, asking for their feedback, or by interviewing a new round of participants about how well the hypothesized elements of the new theory actually explain their experience.

The methods of doing these forms of data collection do not differ markedly from similar methods across all qualitative approaches. As mentioned, however, grounded theorists sometimes avoid too much study of the extant literature on their topic before going into the field, in hopes that they will not be biased by previous conjectures and data about the topic. It is their aim to allow the data to teach them and guide their analysis into a rich explanation.

Grounded Theory Data Analysis Methods and Procedures: Coding

Because grounded theory goes beyond the descriptive and interpretive goals of many other qualitative models and is aimed at building theories, data analysis tends to be more complex and aims to achieve an explanatory power that is not necessary in other approaches. The heart of the grounded theory approach occurs in its use of **coding**, its main form of data analysis. There are three different types of coding used in a more-or-less sequential manner: open coding (labeling and categorizing the phenomena), axial coding (finding links among the categories), and selective coding (selecting your main phenomenon (core category) around which all other phenomena (subsidiary categories) are grouped, arranging the groupings, studying the results and rearranging where necessary).

Research Questions Used to Guide Grounded Theory Research

The type of research questions typically used to guide a study using grounded theory include: process questions about changing experience over time or its stages and phases (for example, What is the process of becoming…?) or understanding questions (for example, What are the dimensions of this experience…?). In grounded theory the researcher may ask understanding questions, trying to elicit the understanding of the participants about their experiences.

PHENOMENOLOGY

The key to understanding phenomenology lies in the phrase "lived experience." Put most simply, phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of persons who are going through the phenomenon to be understood. By using the terms "lived experience" and "going through," we put the focus squarely on exactly how a phenomenon reveals itself to the experiencing person in all its specificity and concreteness. A phenomenon can be anything that a person experiences—but phenomena (the plural) are defined precisely in their quality of being-experienced by someone. A feeling (anger) can be a phenomenon, but a phenomenological study of anger would focus on what it is like to be and to feel anger as an actual, lived experience. Similarly, being hired by a large corporation or being elected to office or losing a loved one in a car accident all are phenomena, but a phenomenological analysis focuses on how the people experiencing them actually experienced them—felt, thought about, perceived, observed, reflected upon them.

As a methodological approach, phenomenology is open to whatever may be significant to the understanding of a phenomenon. The person experiencing a phenomenon is asked to attend to it and then to describe it exactly as it appears in his or her consciousness, without prejudgment, bias, or any predetermined set or orientation. Likewise, the researcher takes great pains to reduce his or her own predetermined sets or orientations so that the reports of the participants can "reach" the researcher's own consciousness with as little filtering as possible. This process of suspending one's preconceptions about the phenomena under inquiry is a process often referred to in phenomenology as **epoche** (pronounced "eh-poh- **kay**"), from a Greek root meaning "to suspend" or (from another root) "to keep steady or hold steady."

It means a conscious attempt to "reduce" the bias of preconceptions by continually setting aside preconceptions and looking anew at the things themselves. The founder of philosophical phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, used to say that the phenomenologist had to be "a perpetual beginner, returning always 'to the things themselves.'" The "things" are the phenomena we are trying to understand. We know that any pure, unfiltered perception is impossible, so the "reduction" of the researcher's biases is an ongoing and always-imperfect thing. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phrase, "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (1962, p. xiv).

Phenomenological Data Collection Methods

There are two descriptive levels of the empirical phenomenological model which arise from the data collected:

- Level I, the original data are comprised of naïve descriptions obtained through open-ended questions and dialogue.
- Level II, the researcher describes the structures of the experiences based on reflective analysis and interpretation of the research participant's account or story.

To collect data for these levels of analysis, the primary tool is the in-depth personal interview. Interviews typically are open – that is, beyond initial orienting information, usually the only pre-formed questions will be open-ended, designed carefully to inquire into the participant's lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation and to allow the respondent the maximum freedom to respond from within that lived experience. Follow-up questions would be asked to tease out deeper or more detailed elaborations of the earlier answers. Because the objective is to collect data which are profoundly descriptive–rich in detail–and introspective, these interviews often can be lengthy, sometimes lasting as much as an hour or more.

Sometimes other sources of data are used in phenomenological studies, when those sources are equivalent in some way to the in-depth interview. For example, in a study of the experience of grief, poems or other writings by the participants (or other people) about personal grief experiences might be analyzed in the same way as the in-depth interviews. Similarly, audiovisual materials which have a direct bearing on the lived experience of grief might be included as data (for example, photos of the participant with the deceased person) and interpreted similarly.

Although other less personal data sources (such as letters, official documents, news accounts) are not often used as direct information about the lived experience, the researcher may find in a particular case that these are useful either in illuminating the participant's story itself or in creating a rich and textured background description of the contexts and settings in which the participant experienced the phenomenon.

Phenomenological Data Analysis

Most standard texts (such as, Creswell, 1998; Lincoln and Denzin, 2000; Patton, 2002; or Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) propose a general five-step model for phenomenological analysis. Resource has developed a generic model involving seven steps:

- Step 1: Prepare the data.
- Step 2: Adopt the phenomenological attitude ("reduction" or "epoche").
- Step 3: Achieve a Sense of the Whole. The researcher reads the entire description in order to get a general sense of the whole statement.
- Step 4: Discrimination of Meaning Units Within a Psychological Perspective and Focused on the Phenomenon Being Researched. Once the sense of the whole has been grasped, the researcher goes back to the beginning and reads through the text once more and delineates each time that a transition in meaning occurs. The specific aim is to discriminate "meaning units" from within a psychological perspective and with a focus on the phenomenon being researched. The meaning unit should be made *with psychological criteria in mind*. The researcher next eliminates redundancies and clarifies and elaborates on the meaning of the units by relating them to each other and to the sense of the whole.
- Step 5: Transformation of Subjects Everyday Expressions into Psychological Language with Emphasis on the Phenomenon Being Investigated. Once meaning units have been delineated and linked together, the researcher goes through all of the meaning units, which are still expressed in the concrete language of

the participants, reflects on them, and comes up with the essence of the experience for the participant. The researcher next transforms each relevant unit's essence into the language of psychological science.
- Step 6: Synthesis of Transformed Meaning Units into a Consistent Statement of the Structure of the Experience. Here, the researcher synthesizes all of the transformed meaning units (now expressed in the language of psychological science) into a consistent statement regarding the participant's experience.
- Step 7: Final Synthesis: Finally, the researcher synthesizes all of the essence or structure statements regarding each participant's experience into one consistent statement, which describes and captures the essence of the experience being studied.

Research Questions Used to Guide Phenomenological Research

The type of research questions typically used to guide a study using phenomenological research include: What is the meaning of…? What is the experience of…? How do people experience and describe…? What is the essence of…? What is the lived experience of…? What is it like to experience...?

Reference

Percy, W. H., & Kostere, K. (2008). *Qualitative research approaches in psychology*. Minneapolis, MN: Resource University.

OBJECTIVES

To successfully complete this learning unit, you will be expected to:

1. Distinguish phenomenology and generic qualitative inquiry.
2. Present data analysis in phenomenology or generic qualitative inquiry.

[u06s1] Unit 6 Study 1

STUDIES

Readings

Read the introduction to this unit, Qualitative Methods: Generic Qualitative Inquiry, Grounded Theory, and Phenomenology. This reading will introduce you to the data-collection and data-analyses procedures of the generic qualitative inquiry, grounded theory, and phenomenological approaches.

Use your Leedy and Ormrod text to complete the following:

- Read Chapter 9, "Qualitative Research Methods," pages 251–277. This chapter provides more information about various qualitative approaches, including grounded theory and phenomenology. You will also find information of case study and ethnography, which will be covered in Unit 7.

In Percy, Kostere, and Kostere's 2015 dissertation, *Qualitative Research Approaches in Psychology*, review the sections listed below. These sections provide additional information on data collection and data analysis for the generic qualitative inquiry, and phenomenology approaches.

- "Introduction," page 4.
- "Generic Qualitative Inquiry," pages 5–13.

- "Phenomenology," pages 27–37.

Library Search

Use the Resource Library to locate a qualitative article from the academic psychological literature that uses either a generic approach or phenomenological approach to study. The Search by Methodology guide will show you some techniques for searching by methodology within the library's article databases. **Note:** You may be able to utilize an article that you have previously worked with, if the article utilizes either the generic approach or the phenomenological approach to the study.

Record the persistent link for the article found within the library databases. The persistent link is different from the URL in the browser window. Use this guide to learn where to locate your articles' persistent links: Persistent Links and DOIs.

Read the article in preparation for this unit's discussion.

Use Finding Articles for Your Discussion Post to learn how to locate articles within the library databases. This guide will walk you through the basic steps of accessing the library databases and creating a search strategy to find articles.

PSY Learners Additional Required Reading

In addition to the other required study activities for this unit, PSY learners are also required to compete the following:

- In Frost's 2011 book, *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining Core Approaches*, read the chapters listed below. These chapters provide in-depth information on the grounded theory and phenomenological approaches, including data collection and data analysis. The chapters also include and examples of research, and they evaluate the appropriateness of both approaches for psychology.
    - Chapter 2, "Grounded Theory Approaches," pages 16–43.
    - Chapter 3, "Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," pages 44–65.

Optional Program-Specific Content

Some programs have opted to provide program-specific content designed to help you better understand how the subject matter in this study is incorporated into your particular field of study. Check below to see if your program has any suggested readings for you.

COUN Learners

- Percy, W. K., Kostere, K., & Kostere, S. (2015). Generic qualitative research in psychology. *The Qualitative Report ,20*(2), 76–85. This article summarizes the goals of the generic qualitative approach and how it differs from phenomenology. It provides details regarding generic qualitative design data collection and analysis.
- Kahlke, R. (2014). Generic qualitative approaches: Pitfalls and benefits of methodological mixology. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,13,* 37–52. This article offers a starting place for researchers interested in entering the literature on generic qualitative approaches and offers some guidance to help researchers appreciate the advantages of using a generic approach and navigate the potential pitfalls.

- Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). 'Clear as mud': Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2),1–24. This article discusses the basic foundations of generic qualitative inquiry providing a discussion of how this approach is a departure from traditional qualitative research approaches.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13*, 3–21. This article focuses on the details of planning a grounded theory study.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice and evaluation of phenomenological methods as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 28*, 235–281. This article provides a description and process of phenomenology.

[u06s2] Unit 6 Study 2

ASSIGNMENT PREPARATION

Resources

APA Style and Format.

Resource Writing Center.

Research Topic and Methodology Form.

Scientific Knowledge, Contributions and Methodology Scoring Guide.

In preparation for your Unit 7 assignment, review your approved study from the Unit 2 assignment. In this unit, you should work on identifying and analyzing these aspects of the study:

- The contributions the research made to your field as a science and profession.
- The theories that provided the foundation to the research.
- The details of the methodology, including the sample, sampling procedures, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion.

[u06d1] Unit 6 Discussion 1 »

QUALITATIVE APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

Resources

Discussion Participation Scoring Guide.

APA Style and Format.

Resource Library.

Persistent Links and DOIs.

For the qualitative article you selected in this unit's studies, in the Library Search section, address the following:

- Identify whether a generic qualitative approach or a phenomenological approach was used, and describe the characteristics of the research that provide evidence to support the identification.
- Identify the key phenomena under investigation.
- Describe the data collection process, including the role of the researcher.
- Describe the qualitative approach to analyzing the data in this study.
- Evaluate the scientific merit of the selected approach. How did the approach used, either phenomenology or generic qualitative, help the researcher answer the research question? How might you have designed this study differently?
- Post the persistent link for the article in your response. Refer to the Persistent Links and DOIs guide, linked in Resources, to learn how to locate this information in the library databases.
- Cite all sources in APA style and provide an APA-formatted reference list at the end of your post.