



University of
South Australia

How to choose a qualitative methodological approach

Dr Joanne Harmon

The discipline and practice of qualitative research

Before you choose which methodology to use, take note of the following:

1. Qualitative research, as a set of interpretative activities privileges no single methodological practice over another
2. Qualitative research is used in many different disciplines, however, it does not belong to a single discipline
3. When qualitative research is used in differencing contexts within other disciplines each application will bear traces of its own disciplinary history
4. Having an awareness of this, will allow insight into how multiple uses and meanings are brought into each practice
5. The most crucial factor involved in the selection of a methodology is being aware and having familiarisation of what types of methodology are out there
6. The methodology you use will result from your construction of a discussion or discourse



Variety of methodological approaches

When picking a methodology a researcher is required to explore the many disciplinary understandings underpinning the application of that approach within the context required

Knowing the separate and multiple uses and meanings of a methodological approach within each disciplinary approach will make it difficult to agree on any essential definition

However, the argument presented by the researcher for methodological approach will outline it as a set of complex interpretive practices that will embrace the tensions and contradictions

This will allow informed resolution to occur on the methods and the forms used in relation to any disputes that may occur in relation to findings and interpretations



Authors	Qualitative approaches/ methodology	Discipline/ field
Jacob (1987)	Ecological psychology Holistic ethnography Cognitive anthropology Ethnography of communication Symbolic interactionism	Education
Munhall and Oiler (1986)	Phenomenology Grounded theory Ethnography Historical research	Nursing
Lancy (1993)	Anthropological perspectives Sociological perspectives Biological perspectives Case studies Personal accounts Cognitive studies Historical inquiries	Education
Straus & Corbin (1990)	Grounded theory Ethnography Phenomenology Life histories Conversational analysis	Sociology, Nursing
Morse (1994)	Phenomenology Ethnography Ethnoscience Grounded theory	Nursing

Maustakas (1994)	Ethnography Grounded theory Hermeneutics Empirical phenomenological research Heuristic research	Psychology
Denzin & Lincoln (1994)	Case studies Ethnography Phenomenology Ethnomethodology Interpretative practices Grounded theory	Social sciences
Miles & Huberman	Interpretivism Social anthropology Collaborative social research	Social sciences
Denzin & Lincoln (2005)	Performance, critical and public ethnography, interpretive practices, case studies Grounded theory Participatory action research	Social sciences
Marshall & Rossman (2010)	Ethnographic approaches, socio-lingual approaches to critical genres such as critical race theory, queer theory etc	Education
Seldens (2011)	Ethnography Grounded theory Phenomenology Case study Autoethnography Critical Inquiry	Arts (theatre)
Denzin & Lincoln (2011)	Performance ethnography Ethnomethodology Action and applied research	



How to argue your methodological approach

Know what is reality or the ontological issue you believe exists and what you believe can be investigated

Work out how you can come to know something or the epistemological issue on how you will come to know about ourselves and the world

Then think about the research processes that will ensure you can provide valid knowledge production. Methodology is being clear on the grounds on which you can claim to have produced 'valid' knowledge

Factor in the roles of values and ethics, the axiological issues will underpin the nature of the values applied and also what will or will not have value in your research

Then think about the techniques for collecting your data in relation to the claims you are making. The methods you use to collect your data will be a direct reflection of all the points above

Once you have done all that, then consideration is required on the language of research. Often a rhetorical issue, but think about how you talk about and write up your research; are you providing reflections or a series of reflections. Will writing be more 'objective' in the first or third person



Methodological frameworks

Will be the blue print for your study and therefore will comprise elements that are as broad as questions relating to paradigm and specific questions like who, where, when, how and what

Think of methodology as an overarching or macro level framework that will offer principles of reasoning associated with particular paradigmatic assumptions that legitimate the disciplinary influences within each various school of thought

Therefore your methodological approach will provide a strategy and a ground for how you will conduct your study



How to design your methodological approach

Have a goal to come up with a plan that will allow you answer your well articulated research question

Getting your methodological design on target will involve recognition each methodological approach will have the potential to draw out answers from a somewhat different perspective

So

1. Make sure your methodological design addresses your question
2. Be within your capacity - you have or are willing to develop the skills and interests needed to undertake it and
3. Ensure all the elements of your methodological design are doable within the time frame provided

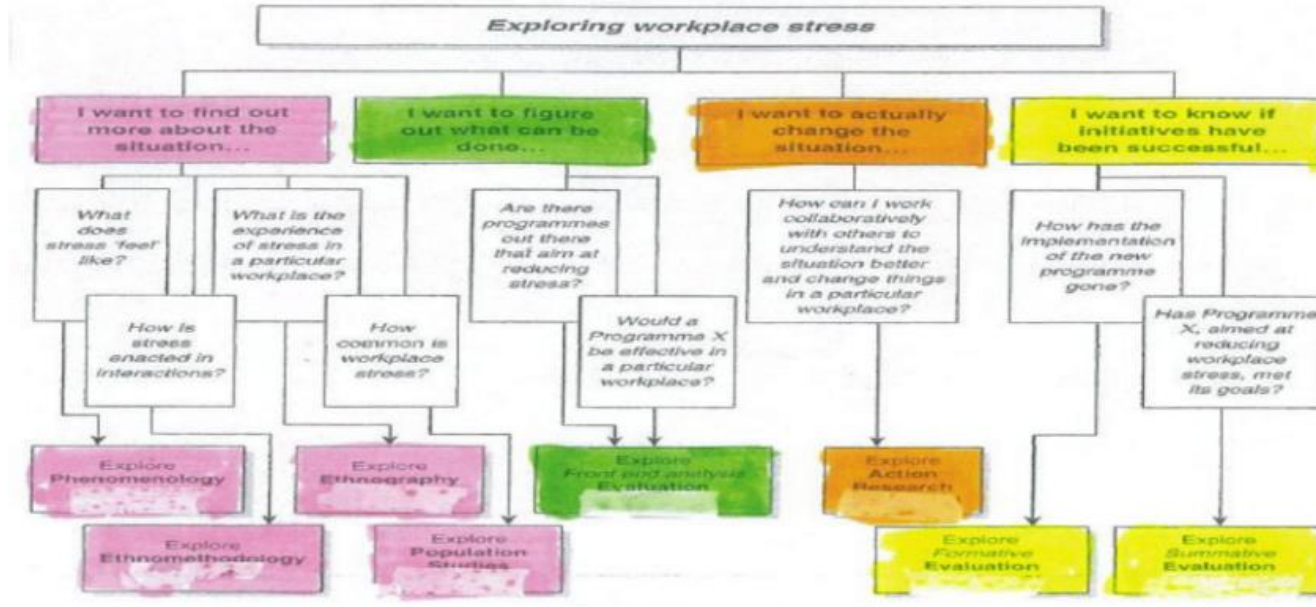


Checklist for methodological development

1. Understand the problem: this may involve looking outwards towards broader societal attitudes and opinions or inwards into the intricacies and complexities of your problem situation
2. Find a workable solution: often a quest towards solutions that might involve assessing needs and visioning futures or locating potential programmes, interventions and/or services
3. Work towards a solution: aim to produce research goals that extend beyond mere production of knowledge and aim for practical applications such as improvement of clinical practice, shifting systems and/or even working towards radical change
4. Evaluate the change: the goal here is to answer the question: evaluation may involve change mapping, outcomes, process development and so on



A working example



References

Cresswell, JW 2013, Qualitative inquiry and research design; Choosing among five approaches, 3 edn, SAGE, USA

Denzin, NK & Lincoln, YS 2011, The discipline and practice of qualitative research, in NK Denzin & YS Lincoln (eds), The SAGE handbook of Qualitative Research, 4 edn, SAGE, UK

O'Leary, Z 2010, The essential guide to doing your research project, SAGE, London





**University of
South Australia**