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Series Foreword

Qualitative approaches have become accepted and indeed embraced as empirical methods within the social sciences, as scholars have realized that many of the phenomena in which we are interested are complex and require deep inner reflection and equally penetrating examination. Quantitative approaches often cannot capture such phenomena well through their standard methods (e.g., self-report measures), so qualitative designs using interviews and other in-depth data-gathering procedures offer exciting, nimble, and useful research approaches.

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed is remarkable. We remember Bill Stiles saying (quoting Chairman Mao) at one meeting about methods, "Let a hundred flowers bloom," indicating that there are many appropriate methods for addressing research questions. In this series, we celebrate this diversity (hence, the cover design of flowers).

The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among approaches and how to learn the different methods. Many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear enough descriptions of the methods, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of these approaches, with lots of examples to illustrate the method so that readers can grasp how to use the methods.

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The purpose of this series of books, then, is to present a range of different qualitative approaches that seemed most exciting and illustrative of the range of methods appropriate for social science research. We asked leading experts in qualitative methods to contribute to the series, and we were delighted that they accepted our invitation. Through this series, readers have the opportunity to learn qualitative research methods from those who developed the methods and/or who have been using them successfully for years.

We asked the authors of each book to provide context for the method, including a rationale, situating the method within the qualitative tradition, describing the method's philosophical and epistemological background, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to describe in detail the steps of the method, including the research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analysis, and variations on the method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing a manuscript emerging from a study that used the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of the approach, along with the benefits and limitations of the particular method.

This series of books can be used in several different ways. Instructors teaching courses in qualitative research could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time as they expose students to a range of qualitative methods. Alternatively, instructors could choose to focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from studies that have been published using the approaches, and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches.

In this particular book, we present descriptive-interpretive qualitative research by Robert Elliott and Ladislav Timulak. This generic approach is the culmination of many years of method development and research by these authors, who were pioneers in introducing qualitative research to the psychotherapy field. The main feature of this book is the integration of methods from across qualitative traditions, particularly grounded theory approaches, with an emphasis on carefully thinking through each decision. Descriptive-interpretive qualitative research is particularly rich in analyzing data at both the descriptive (surface) and interpretive (deeper) levels and telling a coherent story that weaves in historical context and theory. The authors also offer a wealth of suggestions, based on their experience, about how to avoid potential methodological pitfalls.

—Clara E. Hill and Sarah Knox

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1 WHY A GENERIC APPROACH TO DESCRIPTIVE-INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

The approach to qualitative research we present here is based on our experience and represents our values. In the first place, we take a pragmatic attitude toward research. Like you, we find ourselves embedded in a rich, complex, often confusing world, and we want to do our best to understand it in the time we have. For us, like Feyerabend (1975) in *Against Method*, science is about accomplishing practical tasks of understanding the world and ourselves in that world. Methods, theories about method (i.e., methodologies), and rules or guidelines for using those methods are all tools to help us do research carefully and effectively and solve problems we encounter in research. As researchers, we need creativity and flexibility to enhance the accuracy and usefulness of our research. This means that sometimes old, established rules have to be broken, rules such as requiring research to be based only on direct observation, produce results in the form of numbers, and test theories. Knowing which rules to break and when is the hard part, but the result is a kind of grounded, creative freedom in which new research methods can emerge, guided by new sets of rules or guidelines.

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These, in turn, will later be adapted or even broken and replaced by further developments. This vision of research method as a constant process of creative flux in a dialectic of constraint and freedom, structure and chaos, has guided our careers as researchers and, particularly, as practitioners of qualitative research.

Throughout this book, you will see this stance in our approach to qualitative research. You will see it reflected in the methodological pluralism of our approach, in our support of a range of different styles of doing qualitative research carried out by different researchers tackling different topics and research problems. At the same time, you will also see that we are not, by any means, advocating an anything-goes approach to qualitative research. Instead, we try to provide a practical, no-nonsense approach centered on what we see as the essential core of many of the key forms of qualitative research being practiced today. We also point to some of the different useful options than can be added to this core, the research equivalent of a musical theme with variations.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AS A DESCRIPTIVE-INTERPRETIVE PROCESS

Our central argument, proposed in Elliott and Timulak (2005) and spelled out in greater detail here, is that a range of widely practiced qualitative methods with different names are, in essence, variations on a common core of a highly similar set of strategies and procedures, which we collectively refer to as *descriptive-interpretive* (or in the United Kingdom and Ireland, *interpretative*). In this, we follow both McLeod (2011), who grouped most of these approaches under the headings of grounded theory and "variants of grounded theory" (p. 144), and Rennie (2012), who characterized them as centrally involving both description and interpretation. Rennie referred to these approaches as "hermeneutic" (which is just a fancy word for "interpretive"), writing that they represented the difficult middle path between realism and relativism (Rennie, 1998). This family of qualitative methods includes grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rennie et al., 1988), consensual qualitative research (Hill, 2012; Hill et al., 1997), empirical phenomenology (Giorgi, 1975; Wertz, 1983), hermeneutic-interpretive research (Packer & Addison, 1989), interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009), thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and so on.

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In our view, these approaches, which we refer to as *generic descriptive-interpretive qualitative research* (GDI-QR), all involve the following:

- posing open-ended, exploratory research questions, which then guide the study and begin to define domains of investigation;
- collecting open-ended (nonnumerical) verbally reported experiences or observations to answer these research questions;
- committing to the careful, systematic analysis of all relevant reports and observations;
- coming to a descriptive-interpretive understanding of experiences and observations by carefully representing their meaning;
- organizing these understandings into clusters of similar experiences and observations (categories, themes, codes, etc.);
- being critically aware of and disclosing the researcher's interests (domains of investigation), prior expectations, and organizing conceptual framework (theory) as these have helped understand and organize experiences, observations, and categories; and
- integrating categories into some kind of coherent story or model.

For example, in regard to the third point, some of these approaches initiate the process of data analysis by looking at the data line-by-line and writing initial notes (variously referred to as "codes," "provisional categories," "provisional themes") on the margin of the document, whereas other approaches first break the text into paragraphs or sentences (also referred to as "meaning units") before starting to write notes (e.g., codes, provisional categories, provisional themes). Nevertheless, although referred to differently in the different brand-named methods, all of this essentially involves dividing text into manageable chunks, then translating and illuminating the meaning conveyed. Similarly, overlap in the strategies used is visible in other steps of the data analysis process, as we elaborate in Chapter 4.

ORIGINS OF THIS APPROACH TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Before going further, however, we are going to tell you a bit about ourselves. We (Robert and Ladislav—Laco, for short, pronounced "Latso") are both qualitative researchers by inclination and preference but psychotherapy

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researchers beyond that. We have experience applying a broad array of methods (including randomized controlled trials). We are also both practicing therapists coming from a humanistic-experiential theoretical orientation—more specifically, emotion-focused therapy. We thus see ourselves as psychotherapy researchers first and foremost but feel most happy doing qualitative research. In our experience, research and biography are deeply interwoven for us, so we think it is useful to lay out in more detail who we are and how we got to the position we are taking in this book.

Robert's Story

I (Robert) struggled with numbers as a little boy but fell in love with taxonomic systems in biology when I was 10 years old; I have been classifying things ever since. In graduate school, my comprehensive exam essay was a qualitative meta-analysis of the literature of descriptions of therapist in-session intentions (Elliott, 1977), and I did a minor in conversation analysis, studying with Manny Schegloff (Sacks et al., 1974). In 1976, in the process of randomly sampling short segments of therapy sessions, I accidentally came across my first significant therapy event (Elliott, 1983) and set about developing research methods for analyzing these key moments of therapeutic change. At first, I tried applying quantitative methods to do this (e.g., Elliott, 1984); however, I soon became frustrated with these and, over the course of the 1980s, increasingly moved toward qualitative methods—in particular, grounded theory analysis, following the Rennie interpretation (Rennie et al., 1988), with an infusion of empirical phenomenology, following the Wertz (1983) interpretation. Eventually, I developed comprehensive process analysis, a complex descriptive-interpretive approach for analyzing significant therapy events (Elliott et al., 1994).

Having embraced qualitative research by around 1985, I then spent the next 15 years of my career as a qualitative researcher engaged in activities aimed at establishing and legitimizing qualitative research: reading philosophy of science (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1983), developing a critique of conventional quantitative psychotherapy research (e.g., Elliott & Anderson, 1994), and developing and trying to publish systematic guidelines for qualitative research. Thus, in the latter part of the 1990s, I collaborated with Connie Fischer and David Rennie to develop a set of guidelines for designing and evaluating qualitative research studies (Elliott et al., 1999).

My early published qualitative research (e.g., Elliott et al., 1994) contained numerous attempts to apply quantitative-appearing procedures to qualitative research, including auditing methods (to parallel interrater reliability),

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systematic assessment of researcher expectations, and quantification of qualitative themes across participants to facilitate interpretation of findings (e.g., general vs. variant categories), elements that were later incorporated into consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 1997; Rhodes et al., 1994). I subsequently concluded that the specific details of this legitimization project went beyond what is necessary and became worried that restricting qualitative research practice to these particular practices could curtail the creativity and flexibility needed for qualitative research to thrive. I have spent the past 20 years happily skating among a wide range of qualitative and quantitative approaches but always find myself returning to the descriptive-interpretive approach we describe here; it is the place where I feel most myself as a researcher.

Laco's Story

I (Laco) am of a younger generation of qualitative psychotherapy researchers (although nearing my 50s now). Inspired by Robert's work, as well as by the work of other first-generation qualitative psychotherapy researchers such as David Rennie, Bill Stiles, John McLeod, and Clara Hill, I developed my approach to conducting qualitative psychotherapy research as a result of seeking to understand (from reading published qualitative papers) how these researchers (and other colleagues) went about conducting qualitative research. Then, in the early 2000s, during a Fulbright Fellowship, I had an opportunity to collaborate with Robert and learn firsthand about Robert's experiences of conducting qualitative research. This was reassuring because it further confirmed that what I was doing on my own (on the basis of reading the writing of the aforementioned researchers) was similar to how Robert worked. The two of us then presented the basic features of how we do qualitative research in a chapter for a book on research methods in clinical and health psychology (Elliott & Timulak, 2005); this allowed us to begin to outline the approach to qualitative research presented in this book.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND THE BRAND NAMES PROBLEM

The most striking aspect of the current state of qualitative research is just how many different brands of qualitative research there are, all seeking recognition and place. In our experience, newcomers find this quite intimidating. We look at our students and imagine them wondering why qualitative research cannot be more like quantitative research, which appears

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(at least if you do not look too closely) to have a much more defined set of analytic procedures, such as means, standard deviations, tests of differences (*t*-tests and effect sizes), and tests of association (correlations). We find ourselves apologizing for the situation and making excuses—for example, explaining that it is because modern qualitative research is so new and has not had time to consolidate yet into a unified shared consensus. However, we do empathize with their struggle in the face of the range of approaches.

As an illustration of the distortions that can emerge from the present situation, one of us (Laco) once had the experience of assessing two sets of student research projects for a university course. Students had been encouraged to produce two research projects using different methods over the course of their studies. However, Laco found multiple instances in which both projects were qualitative and were similar in the procedures used and the presentation of findings, although students had clearly followed, as instructed, two different brand-named qualitative methods.

Conversely, studies claiming to follow the same method may diverge in their procedures due to a variety of factors, including the phenomenon studied and the scientific discipline the study was embedded in, or simply due to differences in training, individual researchers' practice, or the traditions of the institutions in which the researchers worked. It is thus quite difficult to distinguish clear boundaries between what constitutes one brand-name method and what distinguishes it from another. Indeed, we are not the only ones to notice this: A qualitative meta-method study of 109 qualitative studies of clients' experiences of therapy conducted by Levitt, Pomerville, and colleagues (2017) showed that studies that were supposedly following the same brand-name approach (e.g., grounded theory) did not necessarily follow the same strategies and procedures and could potentially share more in common with studies using a different brand-name approach (e.g., interpretative phenomenological analysis) than with each other. As with brands of psychotherapy, labeling studies with different brand names thus does not guarantee that different methodological strategies and procedures have been used. By the same token, applying the same brand-name methodological approach to two studies by no means guarantees similarity of strategies and procedures. Therefore, we talk about "generic" or "descriptive-interpretive" approaches to qualitative research that share in common an effort to describe, summarize, and classify what is present in the data, which always, as we explain in Chapter 4, involves a degree of interpretation.

The emergence of a wide range of highly similar but differently branded qualitative research approaches is perfectly understandable and worth