CHAPTER

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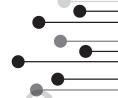
Understanding a Dissertation as Qualitative Methodology: A Section-by-Section Approach

Chapter Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the concept of the dissertation as a methodology—a genre of social science research with conventions that guide development and practice of dissertation studies. Moving directly into an exploration of the dissertation as a unique approach to conceptualizing, designing, and conducting research in the social and behavioral sciences, the chapter begins with a discussion of the historical and contemporary contexts of the dissertation and ends with a look at how institutional contexts and program type shape the focus, structure, and parameters of dissertations. Then, the chapter focuses on qualitative dissertation methodology from historical and technical perspectives, with an eye toward key characteristics and uses of qualitative methodology, methods, and procedures in dissertation research. At the end of the chapter, the basic framework of the book can be seen—a section-by-section approach to the development of a dissertation research methodology and methodology chapter. The emphasis throughout the chapter is on the connections between a study's research foundations and methodological framework, making the case for the selection of specific design and rationalizing the choice of instruments and procedures.

Chapter Objectives

- Discuss historical and contemporary contexts of dissertation research in graduate education

- Evaluate current contributions that shape dissertation methodology in graduate education

- Describe the focus, assumptions, and guiding principles of qualitative dissertation methodology

- Connect methodology work with doctoral program structures and student experiences and identify opportunities to develop research skills in program and professional contexts

- Apply a qualitative dissertation methodology chapter framework within the context of your dissertation study

Dissertations as Socially Constructed Processes and Products of Cultural Values and Rituals

Up to this point, I have explored with you keys to successful completion of a qualitative dissertation methodology and specific guidelines in selecting a dissertation chair that support your methodological decisions and the negotiation of the details of research design and methods in your dissertation study. Through these discussions, I have articulated an explicit, albeit shallow, definition of the dissertation. Here, I discuss with you the elephant in the room: the cultural foundations of socially reproduced and reified notions of dissertation research and culturally produced artifacts of dissertation studies. Sorting out the multiple and competing meanings of what we mean by dissertation research and working toward a more complex understanding of dissertation work may help.

What do we mean by "dissertation"? What is a "dissertation," and what do students produce in the dissertation research process? Conventionally, we mean the following:

- a book-length study or an original research study;

- a contribution to scholarly research and practice;

- a study deposited in a library and accessible in an online repository of similar publications;

- the first among multiple studies in the lives of scholars and academic types;

- a series of steps to follow and structure to use in a process that includes working to the expectations of an advisor and faculty members of a committee who assess work on the study;

- a signature program requirement for doctoral degrees and a culminating experience of a doctoral program of study leading to a terminal degree;

- an opportunity to work closely and collaborate with a scholar or leading expert in the field and a way to be identified with such a line of inquiry for future job prospects;

- a process through which students struggle and many students do not succeed, serving as a stumbling block and obstacle to program completion and perpetual all but dissertated (ABD) status—more on this outcome below; and

- a mechanism that faculty use to screen suitable colleagues for the academy—sort of as a rite of initiation into academic life.

As you can see, there is quite a dizzying array of ways to describe dissertations and a broad range of meaning in what we ascribe to dissertations. When we turn to specific events in the dissertation research process, we find just as many included terms. For example, with the "dissertation proposal" cover term, we frequently find the following definitions:

- the first three chapters of the dissertation or the introduction, literature review, and methodology chapters on a dissertation study;

- the starting point of a dissertation study in which research topic, problem, purpose, and questions are on display and subject to scrutiny of your advisor and committee;

- a challenging set of activities that forces students to consult the empirical and conceptual literature to situate their original study in the broader trends in the field;

- a program requirement that occurs after the qualifying exams and before institutional review board (IRB) protocol approval and data collection fieldwork;

- a point of program departure for many students—an event in a proposal hearing and a product in a proposal that tend to serve as a point of stop-out for doctoral students who move into ABD status;

- a set of conceptualization and design activities where your advisor expects to review and offer feedback on drafts and where committee members share comments ahead of or at the proposal hearing.

Do you see where this is going? The use of the terms *dissertation* and *dissertation proposal* forces us to unpack a lot of cultural meaning in our work. We could go on—how about dissertation defense? Just the cover term *defense* alone is loaded with meaning. What comes to mind for you when you think of defense?

As historically and socially constructed, dissertation research can be seen as a process grounded in cultural rituals of disciplinary, institutional, and departmental groups. These groups, historically comprised of faculty in colleges and

universities in the United States and Europe and now constituted of faculty from around the world, operate within disciplinary associations, academic programs, and institutional structures that tend to inform what counts as scholarship and how systematic investigations—original research—can be carried out. Over time, beliefs about topical areas of interest, paradigmatic lenses, research designs, data collection and data analysis procedures, and interpretive approaches informed standards in the field and conventions of practice. These beliefs reflect deeply rooted value systems about what members of the academy see in their world: their ways of seeing (ontology), ways of knowing (epistemology), and ways of investigating (methodology). Add to their academic belief systems what they expect in terms of work products—research and book manuscripts, scholarly presentations, and more recently extramural funding—and you can see how academic groups reify cultural meaning in what they do and make as academics.

Socializing Into an Academic Field

As a graduate student, how you do learn doctoral dissertation rituals in your program? From program entry to degree completion, Baird (1995) suggests three stages of graduate student socialization. At each stage, students require unique—even if overlapping—guidance. Baird's (pp. 26–28) suggestions for what students need—and what faculty advisors need to provide to students—are instructive. In the beginning stage, students need to

- understand the structure of the field,

- become acquainted with the language and approach of the field,

- become acquainted with the people and emphases of the program,

- find a group of peers,

- find an appropriate faculty sponsor,

- obtain sufficient financial assistance, and

- deal with the specifics of program and university requirements.

In the final two stages, the middle and dissertation stages, Baird offers faculty advisors and students a more intense set of suggestions that relate to program completion, advanced career preparation, and dissertation development. Here, Baird (pp. 28–30) argues that students need to

- master the language and approach of the field,

- identify intellectual and professional interests,

- choose a committee,

- prepare for comprehensive examinations,

- develop the idea and methods for the dissertation,

- seek advice and guidance from a faculty advisor, and

- find encouragement from a faculty advisor.

The behavior, language, and products of faculty at doctoral universities and master's and baccalaureate universities favor dissertation research in various, sometimes diverging forms. Traditionally, the dissertation has taken the form of a book-length monograph—although length in a final dissertation is not a measure of how credible or valuable a study is. Informed by historical patterns of research productivity in the German research universities (Malone, 1981), faculty values related to how to socialize new members to the academy as research scientists framed approaches to dissertation research in Ph.D. programs in U.S. colleges and universities. Returning to the same two program handbooks mentioned earlier in Chapter 2 of this book, we see explicit cultural uses of dissertations as research artifacts of doctoral students. University of California, Los Angeles's (UCLA) Department of Education handbook for the Department of Education in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies (GSEIS) says this about the dissertation associated with its Ph.D. degree program (2010, p. 5): "The dissertation . . . must embody the results of the student's independent investigation, must contribute to the body of theoretical knowledge in education, and must draw on interrelations of education and the cognate discipline(s)." The Rutgers University Ph.D. program in criminal justice articulates a similar approach (p. 13): The doctorate requires . . . original research in the form of a doctoral dissertation. The dissertation is an investigation of a problem of significance that makes a unique contribution to the field. It must demonstrate that the candidate is capable of independent research and analysis, reported in accepted scholarly style, and that s/he has attained a high degree of scholarly competence" (Rutgers School of Criminal Justice, 2015). Even with these approaches to dissertation research codified in program structures—more conventional in nature—disciplinary groups and subgroups shape the organization and content of dissertation research through cultural meaning and interpretations.

Of course, the academy is not a single entity or monolithic group but comprised of many smaller, highly specialized groups of disciplinary members (Becher & Trowler, 2001), and these discrete groups tend to adapt approaches to meet the needs of their specific systems of values, beliefs, and traditions. In academic work and life, no single group generally maintains complete cultural hegemony over all others. Instead, academic groups and subgroups tend to be influenced by their closest cultural identity reference groups and work to maintain their own unique expectations for doctoral student research. Here, academic and research specialization and turf (Damrosch, 1995) over specific areas of scholarship frequently drive outcomes in how faculty train doctoral students. For example, reflecting a more applied approach, the same UCLA department records this about the dissertation in its Ed.D. program (GSEIS, 2010, p. 9): "The dissertation . . . must embody the results of the student's independent investigation and must contribute to professional knowledge in education and the improvement of school practice." Similarly, the California State University, Northridge (2014) program handbook stipulates (p. 14) that "[a]ll candidates complete a dissertation based on a review of the literature and original research on a problem of practice related

to educational leadership, student achievement, and school/community college improvement." Clearly, a focus on practice in the field constitutes these programs' dissertation research process—but key terms such as independence and originality of work retains the essence of a cultural identity as an activity of academic research. In the archived documents of all of these doctoral programs, the work products are clear: dissertations of original research that contribute to what we know and do in the field. In fact, you can see language native to the cultural roots of research faculty: independent investigation, theoretical and applied knowledge, and institutional or organizational improvement (e.g., schools or community colleges).

Among members of the academy, beliefs about knowledge and research work extend to members of different groups and to all types of scholarly contexts. In fact, in a postindustrial context, academic cultural groups have responded to changes in conditions in which they operate—competitive marketization, commercialization, massification, and globalization (Becher & Trowler, 2001). These broader dynamics have changed how academic groups think and behave—and what they produce in their knowledge work. While changes in academic groups and subgroups tend to be complex, standards for how to investigate and organize knowledge in the social and behavioral science research context have been documented. That is, steps to design, execute, and disseminate products of research work have been disseminated alongside changes in higher education institutions and markets. Between shifts in research paradigms, changes in research design and methods, and emerging technologies to collect, analyze, and interpret data, fundamental belief systems have reshaped behavioral forms in the research process—even while basic principles of systematic approaches to investigating human social life have remained the same. This is particularly evident in dissertation research.

With junior and senior members of the academic groups alike—from assistant and associate rank faculty in the tenure review process to the ranks of graduate students in terminal degree programs—reproducing conventional and emerging standards for research processes and outcomes, we can outline what tends to pass as research. If we look at the social and behavioral sciences—and trans- and interdisciplinary fields and applied fields that emerged from and remain connected to them—dynamic conventions of research govern what researchers do and produce. From faculty training graduate students to editorial boards of refereed journals to leadership of academic research associations, researchers abide by a general consensus of what constitutes sound designs and methods for carrying out systematic and rigorous investigations of social and behavioral phenomena. What comes to mind when you say "systematic and rigorous"? These research standards shape the general approaches to scholarly studies and inform the specific steps that researchers use to gather and interpret information in a study. And these standards dictate what you do as doctoral students in your dissertation research.

Historical contexts of dissertations.

The cultural meaning that faculty ascribe to scholarly research has shaped their orientation to dissertation research in terminal degree programs in the United States. As a culminating experience, the dissertation emerged in Medieval Europe as a mechanism for faculty to engage students in an academic ritual that served to train and prepare students for the rigors of their own work. The formal requirements for written research dissertations developed as early as the late 1700s in German universities (Barton, 2005). With the advent of book publishing and a reliable mail system, mechanisms to record, disseminate, and store written texts in Medieval Europe changed how fast information could be shared (Barton). Indeed, faculty at German universities initiated student requirements for written research in the form of a dissertation. The specific forces in German universities that facilitated the development of a model of graduate student research in the form of a dissertation study can be attributed to both academic freedom and scholarly research. Hofstadster and Metzger (1955) argue that the values of academic research and the freedom to teach and learn moved academics in German universities to promote research production as a key benchmark of faculty work.

The historical origins of dissertations as a central experience for students in advanced degree programs in the United States can be traced to American graduate student study abroad experiences in German universities and the migration of German academics to U.S. universities in the 1800s (Malone, 1981). As a general pattern, prominent American students who studied in German universities, earning Ph.D. degrees, returned to U.S. universities to implement the German model of graduate student research and the dissertation as a culminating experience in terminal degree programs (Lucas, 2006). While in dispute about the specific course of study in a terminal degree program, Yale University appears to be the first U.S. university to offer Ph.D. degrees in 1860, and Johns Hopkins is the first U.S. institution of higher education to be founded on the German research model (Malone). Through the 1800s to today, universities in Europe and the United States have continued to use dissertations as a major program requirement and culminating experience for doctoral education (Parsons, 1989).

The scholarly production apparatus and focus on empirical research that characterized early U.S. university faculty practices continue today. With a range of institutional missions and doctoral program areas of focus—research versus applied research emphasis, research-scholar versus scholar-practitioner dispositions—culminating activities in doctoral programs vary and may take forms ranging from a book-length research dissertation to applied research dissertations to a series of research and/or practice projects. While doctoral program requirements differ and new approaches to dissertation research projects have emerged, doctoral program faculty have largely retained dissertation research as a distinguishing characteristic of terminal degree study in graduate education. The place of dissertations as the

most prominent component of doctoral programs (Malone, 1981) remains today and requires faculty to commit time and resources to promoting a coherent, meaningful dissertation research context for graduate students.

Distinguishing characteristics of dissertations.

One of the first and primary characteristics of dissertations is an original approach. As the Council of Graduate Schools (1991) described, the dissertation requires original work, a requirement that "implies some novel twist, fresh perspective, new hypothesis, or innovative method that makes the dissertation project a distinctive contribution" (p. 8). Here, the inclusion of multiple descriptive terms associated with original—*novel, fresh, new, innovative*, and *distinctive*—illustrates the nature of original research in the dissertation context. What do the terms *novel, fresh, new, innovative*, and *distinctive* mean to you? They are seemingly but deceptively simple adjectives that require us to use a mix of creativity, ingenuity, and a sense of inquiry to the research process. In a dissertation study, *novel, new*, and *fresh* may relate to the problem in knowledge and/or practice that you identify, the research design or data collection procedures that you use, or the analytical techniques and interpretive approach that you apply. The innovative and distinctive character of a dissertation study may be seen in the results, findings, and recommendations for future research and practice that you make. How will you distinguish your study from previous studies related to the same or similar topics and/or methods?

The broader context of science can explain, in part, the need to make an original contribution and use a rigorous approach in dissertation research. The thrust of work in scientific inquiry is to produce new knowledge and create new systems in work and society. What is unique to doctoral research in graduate education is the emphasis of training researchers to conduct their work in a manner that is consistent with expectations in the field—rigorous and systematic conventions to create knowledge. A final outcome of research work is to change the ways in which we think and act. Whether this is an incremental adjustment or a substantial change in what we know or do, the idea in dissertation research is to extend discussions about a topic of interest and phenomenon of focus and move people and communities in new directions. In most cases, this approach means that you disseminate findings from dissertation work and apply recommendations to local contexts of practice and broader communities of researchers.

At the conceptualization phase of a dissertation study, the use of existing literature to identify a gap in knowledge and/or practice moves us toward originality and independence in an investigation. That is, you examine what we do not yet know empirically or do in practice. In reviewing both empirical and conceptual literature to inform the development of your research problem, purpose, and questions, you commit to an evaluation and synthesis of research studies to understand what will form the focus of your look at the phenomenon. In empirical studies,

you incorporate rigor into your research framework by grounding the problem in examinations that used standard research practices and withstood scrutiny in the peer-review process. Similarly, the conceptual literature, which generally joins empirical studies in a literature review, tends to enhance the explanatory power of results in a study and allows for a more robust application of an interpretative lens in evaluating the research questions of a study.

As you execute the study that you have conceptualized and designed, originality may mean that you use standard data collection or analysis procedures in new ways. You may think, How can this be possible? With all of the studies that have been published and presented, how can what I propose in my dissertation study be innovative? Just as culinary recipes can be prepared in new ways, so too can research studies. Consider apple pie. Requiring a seemingly simple and easy recipe to make, apple pie can be made in many imaginative and creative ways. A few clicks and a Google search later, you can find hundreds of apple pie recipes! And that is not the end of it—you can make your own unique pie with a new ingredient or ingredients, a different mix of apples, a slight twist on existing ingredients, a change in baking temperature (or an alternative approach to baking), and so on. You get the idea here. In your discipline or interdisciplinary field, how many studies have used the same research design or tradition and procedures in the same research contexts or sites with the same participant groups to examine the specific phenomenon in your study at this time in human history? The replication of an existing study in a different research context is new, and the use of an existing instrument with new participants is fresh. You have done, are doing, or will do the literature review—and you have seen, are seeing, or will see endless combinations of topical areas of interest, empirical and conceptual studies, and research design and methods that result in unique sets of results, findings, and recommendations. This is the essence of innovation in empirical research.

Another characteristic that dissertations tend to exhibit is the use of standards in the field to gather and make sense of information. Culturally, faculty advisors, academic researchers, graduate student researchers, evaluators, and so on reproduce these standards in the field—reifying them in practice, publishing results of research work in journals, codifying them in academic texts, discussing them in graduate classrooms, and using them to advise dissertation advisees. While not static or linear, they tend to dictate steps in the research process—from conceptualizing research problems and questions to designing data collection and analysis procedures. In the dissertation research process, students generally use these standards as a "sustained set of acts through which rigorous habits of mind are practiced and internalized" (Smith, 2010b). Indeed, the practice of these standard practices support rigor in the research process and distinguish empirical from anecdotal sources of information, establishing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability—the hallmarks of what counts—in studies.

In a qualitative methodological framework alone, general research practices and specific practices in qualitative inquiry guide decisions about a range of steps. The lens of a research tradition—ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory,

narrative inquiry, case study, and so on—generally informs how researchers proceed. Using a set of assumptions, principles, and techniques, a tradition's lens helps researchers decide on the types and sources of information; settings and sites to access participants; the approaches to sample, recruit, and select participants; collect data and interact with participants; and make sense of patterns that emerge from an analysis of data. The practices generally establish a common language and an explicit set of expectations for behavior in the field—and research texts tend to be interpreted through them.

A final characteristic that tends to be associated with dissertation research is a problem-solving orientation. Granted, we articulate research problems in our research work, and research problems form the bedrock of most empirical studies—signifying ties to what others have found using standard approaches—but a problem-solving orientation means more than the use of the existing literature to guide a study. Here, problem solving relates to a study rooted in a persistent problem or problems in a local context—particularly among a group or segments of society who have been challenged by or struggled with social inequities or injustices at the community or family levels. This orientation presents a compelling interest to more than just researchers and the academic community—it sustains interest among local and regional stakeholders (and beyond) and holds implications for meaningful change and improvements in the lives and communities where people live and work.

Dissertation forms.

While a range of dissertation formats has emerged in doctoral program practice, the dissertation as a monograph or long-form research report—a five-chapter format—appears as the most common approach. The traditional five-chapter format includes all of the elements of what faculty advisors use in their own research work and teach in methods courses, which conform to broader standards that have been reproduced in academic research work and products. Generally speaking, the following five chapters or combination of five chapters appear in monograph dissertations:

- Chapter 1. Introduction
- Chapter 2. Background or Literature Review
- Chapter 3. Methodology
- Chapter 4. Results or Findings
- Chapter 5. Discussion (of Results or Findings) or Conclusions and Recommendations

Across programs, dissertation chapter titles may vary—with differences characterizing everything from language that must appear in chapter titles and sections headings in each chapter to formatting guidelines that govern how to present a

title or heading across chapters. Frequently, chapter title and section heading differences reflect the focus of a chapter or the emphasis on a specific research concept that the chapter treats. For example, Chapter 1 may be titled as "Introduction" in one program and "Statement of the Problem" in another. In Chapter 2, you may see titles such as "Literature Review," "Review of the Literature," "Related Literature," or simply "Literature"—or you may see a more general title such as "Background." Chapter 3 titles tend to appear as "Methodology," "Methods," or perhaps "Procedures," reflecting a focus on the detailed steps in data collection and analysis. For Chapter 4, "Results" or "Findings" may appear as titles. With some program or department requirements or faculty advisors' preferences in the absence of specific written requirements, the final two chapters—what appear as Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 above—may be combined in a single chapter that covers a discussion of the results—interpretation of analytical patterns, evaluation of research questions, application of empirical and/or conceptual literature to results—and recommendations for future research and practice. Here, a more conventional research journal article may shape the presentation of the final chapter as an efficient, cohesive discussion of results or findings and recommendations for future research and practice. When a fifth chapter appears in a dissertation, the following titles may be seen: "Findings," "Findings and Recommendations," "Discussion and Conclusion," "Discussion and Recommendations," or simply "Discussion."

In some program and department contexts, chapter titles or formats hold ties to faculty's disciplinary roots or research training. For instance, the use of the American Psychological Association's formatting guidelines in psychology, sociology, or education; the Chicago Manual of Style in anthropology and history; and Modern Language Association's (MLA) formatting guidelines in English programs reflects disciplinary connections. The use of documentation styles dictate more than just citation rules that give credit to others' work, they seem to serve as a unifying norm for members of a discipline and frame efforts to socialize new members into the field of study. When instructors, faculty advisors, journal editors, and conference chairs all require the use of a discipline-based documentation style, graduate students work within a set of standard writing features that connects them to senior members of the field and rewards them for complying with expected behavior.

While programmatic and institutional differences in how dissertations present chapter titles appear across U.S. colleges and universities, the content of these chapters generally follows broader standards for research reports—so variations between programs tend to be minimized. In fact, the prevailing model in the monograph dissertation follows a formula that ensures compliance with a set of expectations of work products. Here, the first three chapters—introduction, literature review, and methodology—constitute the dissertation proposal, which serves as a plan or roadmap for gathering and making sense of information in the study. Unique on their own, these three chapters function synergistically within the dissertation proposal as follows:

- **Chapter 1** generally serves as an introduction to a study, establishing the importance of the study and contextualizing the major components of the study within a research framework that includes an opening "hook" that compels the reader to continue to the research problem, purpose, and questions. Chapter 1 often includes an overview of the methodological framework and parameters of the study—limitations and delimitations. Initial chapters may also include a descriptive overview of the conceptual framework and definition of terms.

- **Chapter 2** usually functions as a background, situating a study within broader, overlapping areas of the empirical and conceptual literature related topically to the investigation. The culmination of the work in this chapter is a statement of the research problem that identifies and describes gaps in knowledge and practice related to the areas of the literature and the study's plan to address the gaps.

- **Chapter 3** presents the methodological framework of a study and outlines the steps to collect and analyze data. Guided by a study's research problem, purpose, and questions, the methodology chapter describes the research design or tradition and methods of a study: research setting, data sources and sampling and recruitment strategies, data collection instruments and procedures, data analysis procedures, and research roles.

In general, programs and departments build more or less structure in form and content into guidelines that govern traditional dissertation proposals.

You can see this traditional dissertation proposal in program and department handbooks. In fact, on one end of the spectrum, UCLA's Department of Education's handbook (GSEIS, 2010) advises students to work within a broad set of expectations: "The dissertation, required by every candidate for the Ph.D. degree, must embody the results of the student's independent investigation, must contribute to the body of theoretical knowledge in education, and must draw on interrelations of education and the cognate discipline(s)" (p. 5). By contrast, the doctoral studies program handbook in the Department of Education at Washington University in St. Louis (Department of Education, 2015) allows students and faculty advisors broad discretion in shaping the proposal, whose "format does not necessarily have any fixed structure and organization" (p. 12). But within this general framework, program requirements dictate that dissertation proposals do the following:

(1) explicitly state the questions or themes that drive the research; (2) place these themes within the context of relevant theory or prior research; (3) outline, if possible, the answers to the questions that the

research might produce—these might be formal hypotheses or they may be tentative and illustrative; (4) describe the research design, methods of data collection, and types of analyses to be used in answering the questions; (5) defend and justify any of these items if their importance or merit is likely to be questioned; (6) include a bibliography of relevant literature. (p. 12)

You can see here a similar framework that would be presented in the first three chapters—from an introductory chapter (Chapter 1) that contextualizes the study and offers research questions, to a background chapter (Chapter 2) that describes literature related to the study, and a final chapter (Chapter 3) that articulates a plan to collect and analyze data. With an even more prescriptive approach, California State University, Northridge's (2014, p. 15) doctoral program in educational leadership stipulates that the dissertation proposal "is a draft of the first three chapters (Statement of the Problem, Review of the Literature, Methodology)." But that is really just the start of the organization and content of a proposal. The program handbook goes on to enumerate in descriptive detail what appears in each of the first three chapters (e.g., Chapter 1 includes an introduction, statement of the problem, purpose and significance, etc.).

With the first three chapters, the dissertation proposal transitions to the dissertation—with the final two chapters generally presenting information in the following ways:

- **Chapter 4** frequently presents results of data analysis. In a qualitative dissertation, the focus is on describing patterns in segmented, coded data from interviews, observations, critical incident reporting, structured journaling, and so on. In fact, narrative storytelling of what emerges from a systematic treatment of transcribed textual, visual, or audio data forms the bulk of the chapter and connects the research plan in the dissertation proposal to what the study leaves for others: findings and recommendations. The generous but judicious incorporation of direct quotes organized around themes and subthemes support what you say in this chapter and facilitate participants' voices in the messages that you develop and share.

- In cases where the final two chapters are not combined, **Chapter 5** ends the dissertation with a brief summary of the study, if needed, and a discussion of the results or findings as an interpretive story of the study. The thrust of this final chapter is on describing and in most cases, interpreting analytical patterns through a conceptual lens, where applicable, connecting results to the empirical literature, and evaluating the study's research questions. That is, work in this final chapter integrates results or findings with the empirical and conceptual literature and contextualizes the findings in the broader framework of knowledge in the field. The end of the chapter—and dissertation—usually

ends with a discussion of implications and future directions for new knowledge, offering a set of recommendations related to the results for future research and practice.

Beyond these five chapters of a traditional dissertation, references and appendices with data collection instruments, research invitations, consent forms, and so on may be included.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself

- Have I or will I work within a conventional (monograph) dissertation format? Why or why not?

- If I have or will work with an emerging dissertation format, how have or will I incorporate more conventional features of dissertation research into my work?

Dissertation rituals.

Within program and department environments, the traditional dissertation research process tends to be marked by a series of progressive developmental steps, which serve to support project design and execution, skills acquisition, and socialization for students. In fact, these steps, or events, in the context of the dissertation research process generally function as a set of cultural rituals that advising faculty reproduce among new members of the field. In what can be considered an apprenticeship model of academic training, dissertation rituals prepare advanced graduate students for expectations of junior faculty members, including the process of tenure and promotion (Smith, 2010b). While academic training in the form of dissertation research may not necessarily lead to a post with your chair (Bronfrenbrenner & Juravich, 2001), the ritualistic behaviors related to dissertations in which faculty advisors engage intensify the cultural bonds between senior, junior, and new members of the field and support the development of a set of marketable skills for students. Indeed, this advising model allows students to navigate a supervised research process—from conceptualization to implementation and dissemination. But that is not the end of it—establishing and maintaining relationships, managing expectations, meeting deadlines, and participating in private and public events allow faculty advisors to assess the value and quality of advisees' dissertation research, enforcing standards that the larger group sets.

Dissertation Advising as Research Apprenticeship

Dissertation research rituals promote contact with your chair through an advising process that supports your study. The practice of consulting your chair and members of your dissertation committee offers you an opportunity to be trained by experts in your chosen field of study. Working closely with an expert in the field emerged out of a type of apprenticeship system to train new scholars in the standards of social and behavioral science research, and designing and executing a rigorous, systematic investigation into human social or behavioral phenomena require the supervision of someone who knows how to go about setting up and working within specific research approaches. Over time, this training supports your development as a researcher and identifies you with an established or senior member of the field.

Traditional dissertation rituals frequently take place in curricular and advising contexts. Across general and specific areas of program focus—for example, applied programs that train scholar-practitioners—teaching and advising faculty tend to formally structure events in the dissertation research process in coursework. Here, a range of dissertation research topics may appear in research methods course sequences (where qualitative research design and methods may be explored), yearlong dissertation seminars (where literature reviews and research backgrounds may be developed), and field-based classes (where mini dissertation studies may be piloted). Alongside formal course requirements, advising tends to be where most programs situate events in the dissertation research process. In fact, the most substantive and meaningful dissertation work tends to take place directly with program faculty as dissertation chair or committee members. Taken together, ritualistic events associated with monograph or book-length dissertation research usually transpire in large part over an extended period (of years) in clusters of activity as follows below.

First- and second-year dissertation rituals.

From program orientations, first-year program advising, and first-year coursework, both formal and informal elements of dissertation research development take place. For example, first-year workshops, seminars, and methods courses cover issues related to the identification of a dissertation research topic; dissertation format and chapter contents; dissertation chair selection guidance (if a chair has not been assigned to students at program entry); and support for an exploratory search of the empirical literature to initiate the development of a dissertation research problem, purpose, and questions. As students transition from the first

to second years of their programs, dissertation work tends to take the form of advanced methods courses, faculty research participation, and formal exam processes. With a majority of classroom work done, preparing for and passing qualifying or comprehensive (comp) exams and developing an advanced skill set in the qualitative methodological areas of focus for dissertation work tend to occupy the focus of student advising. Parallel to coursework and exam processes, revisions to dissertation research problems, purposes, and questions—all within the contexts of developing dissertation proposals—occur. At the end of the second year of program study, dissertation proposal hearings may take place—but frequently these events move into the third year and beyond—so let us take a look them now.

Dissertation proposal hearing.

Once past the lock-step comprehensive exam rituals of the second or third program year (or later, in some cases), traditional dissertation rituals typically intensify. At this point—either with the successful outcome in the exam process or committee approval at the proposal hearing, students transition from doctoral student to doctoral candidate. Indeed, this proposal hearing—or defense—seems to mark the move from graduate student to early career apprentice. After all, if students can defend their research work, repel critiques of what they propose to do, and overcome objections to their design and methods—all with the support of their chair—then they have earned this new academic status. And the proposal hearing tends to occur—after committee formation and approval—irrespective of the type of dissertation, traditional or emerging form. Indeed, given the strong need to reproduce disciplinary standards for research work and norms of academic behavior, dissertation committees generally follow formal policies and informal customs that codify belief systems in the field of research and function to enforce normative expectations for early career scholarship. The specific practices that accompany the proposal hearing reify what faculty value: transparent and open process, collegial discussion and debate, critical review and evaluation of work, and developing constructive and prescriptive plans to address areas of improvement. One more cultural value undergirds the proposal hearing: trust. That is, under the apprenticeship model and supervisorial role of faculty advisors, students are expected to address committee recommendations before they go into the field and execute their study. One final set of values may appear in committee environments where faculty members identify as qualitative researchers: an epistemological orientation of social construction of reality and an interpretivist research paradigm.
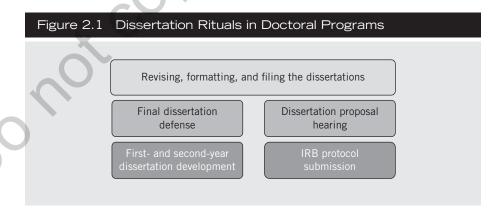
Final dissertation defense.

At the conclusion of the proposal hearing, with recommendations in hand, students turn their attention to work on revisions, human subject protocols (if applicable), and logistics of fieldwork in qualitative dissertation contexts. Once approved by an IRB to conduct human subjects research, dissertation events

move into the field with interviews, observations, and a whole range of data collection and analysis activities unfold. All of these tasks lead to the development of the monograph dissertation study, if traditional, or sets of article-length studies or other project forms of dissertation research, if alternative formats serve as the basis of a culminating project in a doctoral program. Much like the proposal hearing, the final dissertation hearing—or defense—frequently follows a formal process—a brief student presentation, committee discussion, and committee deliberation. However, two practices unique to final dissertation hearings, in some program and institutional contexts, add to the activities that occur in the proposal hearing: a public demonstration or talk that presents results, findings, and recommendation for research and practice; and a signing ceremony of a page that inserts in the front matter of the monograph dissertation in more traditional forms, and in some cases, one final ceremonial custom—a celebration of students' research work.

Revising, formatting, and filing the dissertation as rituals.

So you are not quite done with events related to your dissertation after the final defense. First, students must do the same thing that they did after the first go-around: incorporate committee feedback and revise their final dissertation manuscript based on recommendations from committee members. These final committee comments tend to be limited to results, findings, and recommendations—what appears in the final two chapters of a book-length study. What is more, students must also negotiate with institutional submission systems, which may include electronic or human (think university librarian or university reader or graduate studies officer) format checks and copyright agreements. Filing the dissertation is generally the last act in a series of institutional rituals. See Figure 2.1 for a visual representation of dissertation rituals in doctoral programs.

Figure 2.1   Dissertation Rituals in Doctoral Programs

Revising, formatting, and filing the dissertations

Final dissertation defense

Dissertation proposal hearing

First- and second-year dissertation development

IRB protocol submission

Current Thinking on the Dissertation: Critiques and Emerging Approaches

As colleges and universities transitioned from an era of elite to mass higher education and hyper specialization of disciplines, academic values and cultural identities evolved (Becher & Trowler, 2001). For some faculty members at academic institutions, changes to notions of what constitutes dissertation research followed (Becher & Trowler). Indeed, the idea of the conventional model of a dissertation as a culminating experience of dissertation research has been challenged. While the full force of historically and socially reproduced constructions of dissertation research still tend to dominate U.S. graduate programs and larger disciplinary fields, new approaches to dissertations have emerged across a diverse range of institutions (see Figure 2.2).

Reasons for rethinking traditional dissertations.

With changes in the academic job market and patterns of institutional hiring and teaching assignment, many scholars argue that there are valid reasons to reexamine the traditional dissertation. While there are "reasons for our investment in the dissertation monograph," including the demonstration of abilities to conceptualize, design, and execute important studies in the field (Smith, 2010b), the need to examine the shapes of dissertation research in practice has emerged. In fact, Smith (2010b) argues that, beyond time to degree, "ethical reasons" undergird a reexamination of approaches to traditional dissertations, including human and intellectual diversity, digital media and computer technologies, and skills development of faculty (Smith, 2010b) and future employees in nonacademic and academic positions alike.

Increases time to degree completion and attrition in terminal degree programs.

Very few doctoral students have not heard the following three letters uttered at one point or another during their tenure in their programs: ABD. The dubious distinction of ABD, or all but dissertated, remains at the forefront of many doctoral students' minds as they progress through their coursework, beyond their qualifying exams, and into their dissertation research work. When I first heard ABD as a doctoral student, I thought that I would never suffer such a fate—but many of us had heard or read about students who ended up ABD for one reason or another. ABD is not a formal degree option nor can ABD be used as a formal title—although students could conceivably exit, before completing requirements for a doctoral degree, with a master's degree if they have progressed far enough in the degree program to qualify, file the appropriate paperwork for the degree award, and the university awards a degree in the program of study. And when ABD attaches to students' status while still in a doctoral program, implications related

to time to degree and institutional departure follow. There is ample evidence to be concerned: up to half of students who start as doctoral students do not finish their program requirements and earn a degree. For some doctoral students and faculty advisors, dissertations may explain a large part of these glaring student outcomes—citing dissertation research as the chief delay in time to degree completion (Smith, 2010b) and arguing that women graduate students and pre-tenure faculty face delays in other life outcomes—such as childbearing (Smith, 2010b)—as a result.

Even as early as the 1950s, the dissertation could be seen as an obstacle to degree completion (Berelson, 1960). In a process where graduate students assume primary roles for designing, executing, and writing their dissertation drafts while coordinating committee hearings, requesting feedback from committee members, navigating institutional policies and submissions deadlines, and—perhaps most importantly—meeting the expectations of the committee chair and faculty advisor, the fact that they spend years on a dissertation research project comes as little surprise. To be sure, the dissertation is likely not the overriding factor in doctoral student decisions to leave their programs of study, and Golde (2000) found that doctoral student attrition can be attributed to weak integration into departmental life and loss of commitment to degree completion. But when a degree can take up to 18 years to earn—10.1 years overall and 18.2 years in education, the longest (Snyder & Dillow, 2015)—close scrutiny of the system tends to beg faculty to explore how to address approaches to shortening programs. In fact, even well-integrated students may experience a "sudden breach" and stop out when other priorities or opportunities emerge and occupy a more important position than graduate study (Golde).

While doctoral student attrition is a problem explained by multiple factors, the constellation of activities and requirements associated with dissertation research generally slows—and stops, in some cases—students' degree program progress. Indeed, Patton (2013) explains that dissertation work takes so long because "students are typically required by their advisers to pore over minutiae and learn the ins and outs of preceding scholarly debates before turning to the specific topic of their own work." Add to this exercise, the fact that the practices and policies in some programs do not offer meaningful direction for dissertation study or only general guidance on dissertation requirements, and there is little wonder why dissertations may block student progress. In English and humanities fields, for example, a lack of explicit information and ambiguous policies on dissertation research in many graduate schools and departments persists (Jaschik, 2012), which may lead to confusion among students. And confusion can be seen directly in the faculty advising relationship as Damrosch (1995) describes how many graduate students receive conflicting feedback. When students experience silence from committee members—coupled with comments that run counter to each other—they can face delays (Jaschik). As they work to limit confusion and address unresolved issues, students may face delays in their dissertation work and ultimately, for some students, elect to leave.

New technologies and media reshape
boundaries in research and writing.

As academic institutions adjust to emerging and new technologies, changes in how students approach dissertation research and writing have occurred (Barton, 2005). With new interactivity in technology platforms and new media applications in many fields, the possibilities to move outside of what some students and faculty see as an outmoded, outdated "flat" dissertation format are appealing. Indeed, the Council of Graduate Schools (2009, p. 14) argued, "In the future, graduate education must grapple with encouraging new outputs such as three-dimensional models, video footage, and non-linear projects. It is likely that in the future these and other innovative forms of the presentation of research will come to dominate graduate education."

Overcoming arguments about the lack of rigor and misapplication of standards for research and writing in the field, an increasing cadre of thought leaders and policy makers, campus leaders and faculty advisors, and graduate students advocate for digitizing and activating, so to speak, the traditional dissertation format through digital applications. And there is increasing evidence that new media (i.e., open access or electronically published) may not translate to fewer opportunities to publish in traditional scholarly publishing (Ramirez, Dalton, McMillan, Read, & Seamans, 2013)—buttressing arguments to allow students to adopt such formats for their dissertation work.

Disconnects between students from
nonacademic/non-research careers and
emerging pressures of the current job market.

With over half of Ph.D. graduates accepting their first job offers from employers outside of the academy, many faculty and administrators argue that this is the time to revisit the traditional dissertation (Patton, 2013). In fact, academic job placement and careers in the academy among students in doctoral programs have been on the decline as colleges and universities employ an increasing percentage of faculty on a part-time basis. With over half of faculty in postsecondary institutions now contingent ("Background Facts on Contingent Faculty," 2016), many recently graduated Ph.D. students look to career opportunities outside of traditional faculty or academic research positions. And as the range of doctoral programs in U.S. institutions of higher education continues to change, conventional research degrees such as the Ph.D. may offer fewer opportunities for career development and advancement for prospective students. For example, education doctorate (Ed.D.) programs—and similar applied doctoral programs in fields across disciplines—generally offer students curricular structures and research requirements directly connected to their work in practice.

Even when students remain in research or university settings as career fields, they may face increasing expectations to immediately apply their research skills and publish products of their research work as doctoral students. For example,

in U.K. universities, Jump (2015) recorded a move toward a cluster or bundle of journal-length articles in place of traditional dissertations. What is behind this pattern? Jump cites the "growing pressure on students, particularly in the sciences, to publish their findings prior to graduation—not the least so that they can compete for postdoctoral positions in an increasingly international job market." So rather than spending an inordinate amount of time and resources on writing a monograph on current literature related to their studies and documenting every painstaking step in the research process from methodology to results, students may be better served by building a series of shorter, journal-length papers that can be disseminated quickly and shared efficiently. While potential issues of co-authorship and absence of detailed steps in the research process in articles may arise with journal articles, faculty advisors argue that requiring students to articulate their roles in studies and maintain descriptive documentation of their methods offers greater support to students in the academic job market.

Resistance to changes in conventional dissertation research structure.

While newer formats and processes of dissertation research have emerged as alternatives to traditional dissertation writing and research production, the academy has been generally resistant to change. The evidence: conventional dissertations in the book-length form still serve as the prevailing model of the culminating project of degree programs. Indeed, the centerpiece of doctoral student research remains the monograph dissertation—even if scaled in applied programs and adapted to comply with disciplinary norms for entry-level research and writing. Need more evidence? Just check on any website of a program or department that offers a Ph.D., Ed.D., or other doctoral degree, and you will likely find multiple references to parameters for a five-or-so-chapter dissertation, requirements for committee membership, and procedures for holding hearings. Look further, and you will see that these requirements often appear in program handbooks or manuals, codifying outlines and steps in the dissertation research process. Inquire within—talk with a department chair, program director, or prospective dissertation chair—and you will almost certainly find faculty who favor the conventional dissertation.

While many faculty continue to work within the monograph dissertation and tend to resist changes to the approach to guiding and supervising students through the research process, some faculty are open to change. For example, the MLA, through a task force of alternatives to the traditional dissertation, sponsored a survey of doctoral-granting departments, finding that many department leaders would consider changes to the traditional dissertation (Jaschik, 2012). Still, these same department leaders shared that they would likely be constrained by the graduate schools within which they operate. Further, the survey found that very few departments have formally changed their dissertation research practices (Jaschik).

Why have so few departments or graduate schools been open to change—even if some faculty members are? What is behind individual and institutional resistance to change in dissertation formats? To be sure, the pattern can likely be explained by several factors that range from student behaviors to faculty attitudes to institutional norms. For example, doctoral students who hang around and write a research opus in the hopes of getting hired tend to extend their time to degree and work within the traditional dissertation structure—some serving as teaching or research assistants or segueing into postdoctoral positions. For their part, some faculty with outmoded technology skills and a disinterest in using new digital resources may operate as advisors along similar lines as their advisors did—working within a more traditional structure to research and writing. More broadly, weak institutional commitment and few technical and financial resources mitigate a move toward more technologically mediated approaches. Perhaps stronger than any force related to faculty technology skills or student career interest is faculty and administrator beliefs that the traditional dissertation ensures quality in the degree program.

Ensures quality in rigorous academic programs.

You've heard this one, right? The argument goes something like this: The dissertation requires students to engage in original research on a topic related to theory and practice and use systematic approach to gathering and making sense of information. This is rigor; this is quality—so goes the belief that traditional dissertation research supports graduate student development and preparation. What appears to stand behind the conventional dissertation is the notion that understanding and applying broader research standards in the field offer opportunities to investigate and share knowledge that is meaningful and useful—and lead to career promotion and advancement in tenure-line faculty positions. Beyond implementation of curriculum and qualifying exams to assess student knowledge and skills, the reasoning is as follows: traditional dissertation research formats generally offer program faculty familiar standards and procedures for gauging student development.

Facilitates students' engagement with scholars and practitioners.

The traditional dissertation has served as an indispensable mechanism to assess graduate student preparation for research work and readiness for an academic career for centuries. Integral to this experience is student–faculty interaction, particularly in dissertation advising relationships. Indeed, the assignment and role of faculty advisors generally manifests as students move through their curricular sequence in graduate education degree programs. In fact, a central argument to traditional dissertation research and writing focuses on a group of faculty members as a committee—not just a single faculty advisor—offering students feedback and critical comments to enhance student research work

product in the dissertation proposal and final dissertation study. We know that graduate student contact with faculty means something—doctoral student development and program completion can be traced to student interactions with faculty advisors (Blackwell, 1983; de Valero, 2001; Luna & Cullen, 1998; Lyons, 1990; Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997), and the persistence of the traditional dissertation model tends to be based on the belief that these advisor–advisee experiences are essential to student learning and career preparation.

Prepares students for academic or research careers.

Not surprisingly, the primary training program for academic jobs has been the academy. Like an apprenticeship model of training—from doctoral student status to postdoctoral research posts—faculty have historically coordinated and overseen the development of the standards and practices of developing and certifying new members in the field. The requisite skill set for research production—primarily in research and writing—dominates the approach and offers legitimizing experiences in empirical research in the dissertation as the focus of faculty work with students. Here, faculty who work directly with students who plan to go on to careers in the academy or closely aligned research fields tend to rely on the monograph dissertation as the training tool to support career development. But since the academic job market has not yet caught up (Patel, 2016) with academics largely trained in traditional disciplinary frameworks that value research, scholarly activity, and knowledge production, book-length dissertations may not work for up to half of all doctoral students.

Emerging approaches to dissertation research in doctoral programs.

As early career faculty emerge, new disciplinary leaders assume gatekeeping posts in the field, established scholars reshape their research agendas, and late career faculty vacate their positions, the theory and practice of research evolve. In response to changing epistemologies in the discipline, pedagogical and technological innovations on campus and in the field of research practice, and broader social and political patterns, researchers update methodological approaches and procedural steps to gather and interpret information. These evolutionary changes extend to dissertation research, too. In fact, what we see as dissertation research now would not have been considered such research in the past—and may still be eschewed in some quarters of the academy.

When we consider the historical role of dissertation research in graduate education, we see where conventional monograph dissertations remained a centerpiece of degree requirements. Indeed, gaps in graduate student preparation in doctoral programs historically focused on research and the demands of the academic labor market (Austin, 2002). More recently, while not widespread, many academic departments have responded to the more competitive market in higher
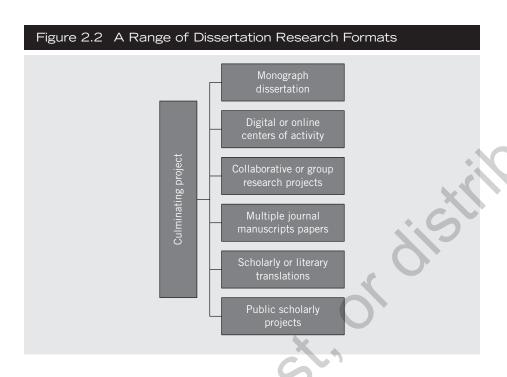
education—marketing to prospective applicants and attracting the most talented undergraduate students and early career professionals. In some academic recruitments, search committee chairs and members expect competitive candidates to have a broad set of teaching skills and knowledge of pedagogy and instructional technology—in addition to a solid grounding in the foundations of research in the discipline and documented evidence of the potential for scholarly research production.

In addition to this shift to prefer candidates who can teach and use technology, many faculty seem to be moving toward a broader view of graduate education—where scholarly contributions need to be connected to practice and nonacademic jobs hold value for degree completers. Given the continuing reliance on contingent faculty in U.S. higher education institutions and the declining state resources allocated to public colleges and universities, academic job opportunities are more difficult to find. What is more, fewer Ph.D. graduates are going into academic posts—with alternative academic opportunities attracting students to nonacademic jobs. These "alt-ac" or alternative academic jobs may involve campus administrative posts or work in libraries, museums, or research fields—including nonprofit and community organizations (Bousquet, 2015). While closely connected to or aligned with academic work, these positions do not require the same scholarly research qualifications or experience in designing, conducting, and disseminating traditional research studies. Instead, prospective applicants for nonacademic jobs generally need more applied research skill sets and writing skills that appeal to a larger audience. Moreover, incumbents in these alternative academic careers may need to develop and demonstrate more advanced or specialized technology skills than what is required for teaching and scholarly research.

The patterns in academic and nonacademic career tracks for graduate students have been associated with changes in how faculty in doctoral programs interpret and support dissertation research. In many institutional contexts, these efforts may not yet be codified in graduate education policy or widespread in practice, but some faculty advisors now support students who pursue alternative forms of dissertation research—outside the normative book-length monograph that uses standard research approaches. These approaches include a series or "suite" of shorter essays or paper, either connected thematically or topically or discretely and uniquely (Smith, 2010a, 2010b). In addition, Smith (2010b) enumerates several new twists on the traditional dissertation:

- collaborative research projects with peer and/or faculty advisers,
- digital projects linked by theme or application,
- scholarly or literary translations, and
- public scholarly projects.

Add to these alternative dissertation formats comic books and video game applications (Patel, 2016)—and you can see how the traditional dissertation is in

Figure 2.2 A Range of Dissertation Research Formats

Culminating project
- Monograph dissertation
- Digital or online centers of activity
- Collaborative or group research projects
- Multiple journal manuscripts papers
- Scholarly or literary translations
- Public scholarly projects

transition. Of course, comic books and video games as dissertation texts generally relate to the scholarly literature and exhibit characteristics of academic work. As such, a comic book may be used as a mechanism to learn about a broader set of concepts, or a video game—much like larger trends in instructional use of gaming apps—may be played to apply scholarly literature to practice.

The efforts to add options to traditional dissertation approaches appear to be gaining ground among departments as evidenced by policies or guidelines in program handbooks and websites. Recently, doctoral programs at a diverse set of institutions have experimented with digital or online centers of activity, collaborative or group research projects, and multiple journal manuscripts. For example, during her work as a graduate student in the English department at the University of Maryland, Amanda Visconti designed, developed, and successfully launched and defended her interactive digital dissertation—a website where viewers can interact with James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In another example, the University of Michigan's Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health (2015, p. 17), offers the following two options to students:

> The Dissertation can be written in the traditional book format or it can be composed of 3 papers of publishable quality that are related to one another. The traditional format develops an argument throughout the dissertation and provides details and findings of the research done by the student, with each chapter building on previous chapters. The three-paper

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format includes an introductory and a concluding chapter that preface and draw from all 3 papers, respectively, but each paper should be able to stand-alone. While it is not required that any of the 3 papers are submitted or accepted for publication at the time of the Dissertation defense, many students will have submitted at least 1 of their 3 papers before defending the dissertation.

Here, students in the program may adopt the traditional monograph dissertation or the suite of three manuscript-length articles or papers. Similarly, at Washington University in St. Louis's Department of Education (2015, p. 13), students "may complete either: 1) a traditional monograph (single narrative write-up of the study), or 2) Three (3) to four (4) published or stand-alone 'ready-for-publication' papers. One of the standalone manuscripts included in the dissertation can come from the student's Doctoral Qualifying Portfolio."

Beyond individual faculty and outside of program contexts or institutional environments, larger academic associations appear to be open to new approaches to dissertation research work. For example, through the MLA, folks in English and humanities disciplines have considered alternative approaches to the traditional dissertation. Spanning nearly a decade—since a 2006 report on tenure and promotion—the MLA has grappled with how to reframe dissertation research work. More recently, the MLA has formally considered how to reimagine the dissertation in graduate degree programs. Through a presidentially commissioned task force, the MLA brought together department chairs and leaders in the discipline to discuss alternatives to the dissertation (Jaschik, 2012).

Reflecting the momentum of the movement to reconsider the dissertation, the Council of Graduate Schools (2009) has examined the impact of information technology and specifically digital technology on graduate education. In fact, the Council of Graduate Schools (2016), with support from ProQuest, underwrote a project on changes to the dissertation, culminating in a workshop where a group of higher education leaders convened to discuss the future of the dissertation. Clearly, these recent trends among individual faculty, departments, institutions, and broader associations points to an increasing acceptance and use of alternative forms of dissertation research for students whose career interests or job prospects lie outside the academy.

Understanding Methodology in Qualitative Research

While the previous chapter focused on building an executable dissertation project and developing a qualitative methodology with a dissertation chair or advisor (or major professor) and committee members, the focus here is on the foundations, assumptions, and guiding principles of qualitative dissertation research. The thrust of what follows in this chapter prepares you to undertake the section-by-section work

to produce a qualitative approach to design and execute your dissertation study. The chapter ends with a preview of the next section of the book: how to move through the development of a qualitative methodological framework in the dissertation.

Methodological foundations of qualitative research.

While we have discussed methodology conceptually and have applied a conventional understanding of methodology to dissertation contexts, we have not yet defined methodology in technical terms. In the simplest terms, methodology is an approach to investigating the world and, more specifically, the social world. But methodology implies more! As Schwandt (2007, p. 193) explains, methodology is a model to follow in a systematic approach to research that includes what you believe, assume, and use to guide general methods and procedural details in the field. Schwandt goes on to say that methodologies articulate the following:

(a) the kinds of problems that are worth investigating, (b) what compromises a researchable problem, testable hypothesis, and so on, (c) how to frame a problem in such a way that it can be investigated using particular designs and procedures, and (d) how to understand what constitutes a legitimate and warranted explanation, (e) how to judge matters of generalizability, (f) how to select or develop appropriate means of generating data, and (g) how to develop the logic linking problem-data generation-analysis-argument.

Clearly, methodologies direct almost every dimension of a study—encompassing (a) what is important to study, (b) how to formulate studies, (c) how to go about gathering and making sense of information related to the study, (d) how to interpret patterns from an analysis of information in the study, (e) how to transfer findings to other contexts, and (f) how to produce and disseminate contributions to further inquiry and practice. Schwandt finishes his discussion of methodology by arguing that methodologies function as an intermediary of sorts between methods and specific steps in procedures of data collection and broader philosophical issues in the social sciences like casual relationships, for example. One important note from Schwandt's discussion of methodology for qualitative researchers needs to be clarified: One of the goals of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize from a sample to a population but rather to transfer what is learned about one group to other groups in similar contexts.

Methodological details in qualitative inquiry.

Along the spectrum of qualitative and quantitative lines of inquiry, methodologies historically associated with qualitative research include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and case study—among others. While some researchers argue that case study does not qualify as a research methodology or may not be considered either a strictly qualitative or quantitative methodology,

we can discuss case study as a specific approach to investigating a social phenomenon—and an approach that is especially well suited to applied dissertations. What these five qualitative approaches to inquiry have in common are the goals of research: discovery, description, verification, and interpretation (Ambert, Alder, Alder, & Detzner, 1995; Peshkin, 1993). What is more, all five methodologies offer opportunities for in-depth explorations of human social behavior. In Chapter 4, you can find more detailed discussions of qualitative methodologies and their application in dissertation contexts.

Whereas methodology relates to approaches to inquiry that include considerations for what matters and how to proceed, methods refer to the overall approach and specific procedures for gathering information in an investigation. That is, methods focus on how to generate data—information from research participants or subjects in an investigation—whereas procedures detail the specific steps that you will take to actually gather information. In this way, methods direct the procedural steps to identify, locate, and recruit people from whom you collect, analyze, and interpret information. Here, methods guide what researchers do in the field, office, or lab with the information that they have or gather. You can see key differences between methods and procedures in Table 2.1. The relationship between methodology and methods is one of direction: The methodological lens that researchers use informs overall approaches in data collection (methods) and step-by-step details in data collection (procedures) that they adopt. Indeed, the assumptions about what problems, questions, and information are valued prescribe ways to go about gathering and making sense of the information—they are embedded in the steps. As they say, the devil's in the details—but more on this later in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 with data collection and analysis!

In practical terms, methods tend to be classified by procedural steps—data collection and data analysis or information gathering and meaning making. Generally speaking, data collection methods in qualitative research include structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (i.e., ethnographic) interviews, observations, structured journals, critical incident reports, and document data collection. But what these procedural terms in the context of data collection tend to omit is the early steps in the process (really, the pre-fieldwork procedures): building rapport with gatekeepers and working with site staff and key players in research settings to invite, recruit, and secure research participants. More on these activities later—in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5—when research settings and data sources come into focus. In addition to methods of data collection, research methods include data analysis procedures that usually articulate how researchers make sense of the information that they gather. Generally speaking, researchers in qualitative studies detail analytical steps to move from raw data (e.g., digitally recorded audio interviews, observation field notes, digital document data, etc.) to patterned data or results of segmenting, coding, networking, thematizing, and interpreting data. Conventional analytical approaches in qualitative research include thematic data analysis—an overarching approach with procedural elements that tend to characterize steps across methodology- or discipline-specific approaches—constant-comparative method, narrative analysis, content analysis, and so on.

Table 2.1 A Look at Data Collection Methods and Procedures in Qualitative Inquiry

Data collection methods		Data collection procedures	
Definition	**Types**	**Definition**	**Details**
Overall approach to gathering information in the field	• Personal interviews • Group interviews • Observations • Structured or guided journals, diaries, or logs • Document and archival data collection • Video and/or photographic data collection	*Specific steps* in gathering information in the field	• Work with gatekeepers/sponsors to access and recruit participants • Sample, contact, and recruit prospective participants • Screen participants for eligibility for inclusion in the study • Arrange or schedule events or sessions to collect data • At data collection events or sessions, welcome/greet and consent participants • Proceed with questions, observations, prompts for structured or guided journals, etc. • Record and detail field jottings or researcher notes, etc. • Manage and maintain relationships in the field, plan for field exit, etc. • Return to participants for member checks (if applicable)

When we consider research methodology and methods, we need to distinguish between these two terms and a commonly used term in qualitative research: research tradition. You are lucky here, if you identify as a qualitative researcher and use or will use qualitative research methodology in your dissertation! Why? Simple: You have another, distinctly qualitative term to describe your approach to inquiry: research tradition. While not universally accepted, I argue that research traditions are akin to research methodologies—explicitly articulating what is important to researchers, what they value in terms of problems, purposes, questions, and methods. According to Schram (2003, p. 66), research traditions are "rigorous, discipline-based carefully specified ways to conceptualize, describe, and analyze human social behavior and processes." Indeed, Schram goes on to argue that research traditions have assumptions, principles, and procedures associated with them—much like research methodologies. Again, we are fortunate to have a seemingly organically derived term intimately connected to qualitative inquiry— it feels good—so you should feel free to adopt and use it interchangeably with methodology or exclusively in place of methodology in your dissertation.

Connections between empirical research and qualitative methodology.

Within the contexts of research studies, the connections between previous and current research are the linchpin of empirical investigations. The links between the constellation of empirical research studies that relate to current studies serves as the foundation of the research problem, which informs the development of research purpose—or what will be done and accomplished—and research questions—which will be answered in a study. The combined work of a research problem—which identifies gaps or shortcomings in the current empirical literature and justified the need for current studies—research purpose, and research questions underpins the research framework of studies—functioning to direct the way that information is gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. Indeed, the gaps or limitations in extant research studies that researchers identify circumscribe where to go, whom to talk with, how to meaningfully make sense of what they discover, and in which ways they can share what they learned.

Key Questions to Ask Yourself

- What does/do my research question(s) and research purpose look like now—wherever I am at in the dissertation stage?

- What will my question or questions and purpose look like as I move through my methodology chapter sections?

Working with qualitative research problems, purposes, and questions to inform methodology, researchers generally situate their research design and methods within the broader empirical and conceptual literature. In fact, Sternberg (1981, p. 101) shared an example of how his study's "methodological design paralleled the theoretical model" presented earlier in the study. If you go immediately to a study's research questions, you will likely discover how previous research informs them—from the phenomenon to the group and context. Moreover, you will likely find elements of a conceptual framework present in the questions—from terms that may be used or a focus on a specific social phenomenon. Tracing these elements back to the research problem, you will find direct connections to what we still may not know about the topic or do in practice related to the topic—which derive from the review of the empirical literature. On this point, Krathwohl and Smith (2005, p. 76) argue, "The method section should fulfill the expectations created by the foregoing sections."

The studies that a literature review presents inform the research problem not just in terms of the phenomenon, group, and setting under investigation, but also the methodology that may be used to examine the phenomenon within the group

and at the setting. In some cases, researchers adopt the same or similar research methodology that appears in studies in a literature review, while in others the application of a different methodology is appropriate. For instance, if a researcher reproduces a previous study in similar contexts with the same group, she or he will likely need look at the problem from a different methodological lens. Similarly, situating an existing study in a new setting while focusing on the same phenomenon and group and using a similar methodological approach would work equally well. These approaches would qualify as a fresh perspective or novel twist on the existing literature and set up the study to examine the phenomenon in a new way—making a strong contribution to what we know.

A study's research problem, purpose, and question also generally present a methodological approach to investigate the problem and evaluate the questions. While sometimes more subtle than more direct references to the literature, the focus of a question and terms used in a question often reflect dimensions of a study's research methodology. For example, the use of the term *experiences* may point to the use of ethnography in the study's approach to gathering and making sense of information. Likewise, when a question focuses on interaction, the study may use a phenomenological approach. While you can find a more in-depth discussion of research question–methodology connections in Chapter 3, you can note here that qualitative methodology may be embedded in research questions, purposes, and problems—reflecting decisions about how to collect, analyze, and interpret data.

Qualitative Dissertation Methodology in Doctoral Program Contexts

Can I do a survey and interview? Can I use mixed methods? Can I just use interviews? How many participants do I need? Where do I find them? How do I recruit them? Can I do the study at my school? Should I do an ethnography, or can I just use a case study? Or how about an ethnographic case study or a case study that borrow principles from ethnography? An educational ethnography appeals to me—what about that one for my study? I've read a bit about phenomenology—what would that look like with my topic? Some of the very first questions from prospective and assigned dissertation advisees that I hear relate to research methodology. These questions generally focus on overall approaches to gather information in studies—through research traditions—to the nuts and bolts of fieldwork—sampling and recruitment procedures and data collection and analysis procedures.

While we tend to situate systematic and rigorous investigations in an evaluation and synthesis of empirical and conceptual literature, a natural place to start—even before or as you articulate a research problem, develop a research purpose, or formulate research questions—relates to what you will *do* in your study. Asking and seeking answers to questions about what will happen—how you will get from research topic and questions to results, findings, and recommendations—mitigate concerns about logistical details in executing a study and reduce anxiety related

to unknown, uncontrollable elements in social science research generally and qualitative research in particular. And these questions are well suited to discussions with faculty advisors, who ultimately—later with dissertation committee member support—approve of the methodological framework that you will use in your study.

Conventionally, the methodological framework of a study emerges from the broader research framework—the research problem associated with a review of the empirical literature that informs the research purpose and questions. While this approach has been tested and used historically, early-stage doctoral students may be intimidated by more advanced steps in the research process—and a clear, articulate, well-conceptualized methodological framework is one giant step. What is more, the early use of research conventions in the initial phase of a study can sometimes feel rigid and overly structured, stymieing initial progress to make sense of a topic and test evolving ideas.

In many advising contexts, sometimes it is more of a chicken-egg scenario in the early research process where you are not quite sure what the formulaic components of the study will be: phenomena, population (group), and site (context). For example, one of my former students had an interest in examining the experiences of African American collegiate swim coaches who competed as collegiate swimmers. With an interest in exploring the experiences of African American collegiate swim coaches, some of the initial questions that this student asked were: Should I use ethnography or phenomenology? If I use ethnography, is a holistic or contextualized approach better? Can I approach a few folks I know from my collegiate swim career and current USA Swim coaching roles? The first two times that she and I met to discuss dissertation research, considerations related to the literature review arose only near the end of the second meeting. Instead, we talked about what interested her, what she would like to explore in her study, what the goals for her study were, and how she would achieve them. These discussions naturally led to the *how* of her research work in which she strategized about the procedural details of fieldwork, including when, where, and with whom she would collect data. This focus seemed liked a more organic process for her—as her initial questions drove the direction of the conversation.

How to talk about qualitative methodology in dissertation advising contexts.

In the next chapter, I will discuss with you dissertation methodology as a discrete lens with methodological assumptions, principles, and guidelines. Here, the focus is on how to successfully negotiate a methodological framework that works for your chair and for you. Given that your chair approves dissertation work, the need to present and

support your ideas, argue and defend your interests, and ensure an outcome with which you can live is important. While you may not necessarily need to engage in intense debates about what you want or need to do to structure your research design, data sources, data collection and analysis procedures, and discuss your researcher roles, the use of qualitative methodology in dissertations requires a sense of the objections that faculty advisors or instructors may raise and strategies to overcome these objections. These strategies include pragmatic approaches to connect dissertation research to substantive activities of doctoral student work and a general understanding of social science research applied within dissertation contexts. Here are some common areas where dissertation advisors and student advisees may disagree:

- *The need to use mixed methods or to include a survey in your qualitative dissertation.* I sometimes hear an argument from students in my qualitative methods and action research classes that goes like this: "I need (or have) to do a survey because my chair (or instructor or fill in the blank) said that my study needs one." Sometimes students seem intent on "doing a survey" themselves; other times, the claim emerges from a discussion with students' dissertation chairs or previous course instructors. Whatever the source, the rationale for this approach tends to run along similar lines: What counts as empirical research is an experimental or observational survey research design. While such a design may be appealing and an argument about what constitutes empirical research may be attractive, there is little need to adopt an explicitly quantitative research design when a study's research problem, purpose, and questions all relate to a qualitative research design that meets the standards for a rigorous, systematic empirical investigation in the disciplinary and larger social science research frameworks. In fact, unless your study's background justifies the use of a survey in a mixed methods design, including one in the study would run counter to conventional approaches in social science research—especially if you use a survey with a small sample size or a sampling technique that is purposeful to recruit participants for later interviews. What is more, using a survey without justification potentially could confound the study's results and findings and unnecessarily extend time to complete the dissertation study and degree program.

- *The claim that you must use multiple qualitative data collection methods for a "valid" study.* Like the need to use survey research methods in a clearly qualitative research design, when students (or faculty advisors) argue that multiple methods must be used in a dissertation study, they generally cite the need to triangulate data. In these instances, I generally ask, Why do you need to triangulate data through methods alone? As we will see in later chapters, we have several strategies to ensure credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable studies in naturalistic inquiry with a single qualitative data collection procedure. These strategies

include adoption of practices to mitigate researcher bias and participant reactivity and the use of multiple approaches to triangulate data by data source (e.g., persons, processes, events, documents), data type (e.g., textual, numeric, audio, video), and data collection procedure (e.g., personal interviews, group interviews, observations, critical incident reports, etc.). Here, avoid the use of extra steps in data collection, steps that can have a ripple effect on data analysis and interpretation and can add time on events in the context of the study.

- *The insistence that more than one research case and/or data collection site be included in your study.* Along similar lines as the previous argument (which all seem to be logically connected), student advisees or faculty colleagues sometimes share that students need to work with multiple sites in a dissertation study—irrespective of the research problem, purpose, or questions. Generally speaking, if a study's research problem identifies a need for a comparative approach to explore or understand a phenomenon or a group across institutional or organizational contexts, then a multisite design would be appropriate. By contrast, to include more than one site in a study without justification makes little sense in qualitative research methodology and may delay research progress if issues with access and permissions arise. What is more, the selection of sites without the use of a standard purposeful sampling strategy or strategies adds to the mess of a multisite study that appears to require a single site only. Why messy? When students include more than one site in a study without tying the decision directly to the background, they risk running into problems with data access and permissions and not maintaining a comparative lens throughout the data analytical and interpretive phases of the study.

- *The notion that case studies are the best approach to conducting qualitative studies in applied or professional fields.* While generally uncommon, I have heard this argument from some colleagues. In fact, these colleagues contend that students in applied fields—like education, social work, urban planning, or public health—may not have the requisite skills to design and conduct a full ethnographic study, for example. In addition, they argue that students in these programs tend to have time, resource, and career restraints that prevent them from traveling and/or entering the field for a year or more to conduct an ethnography. Indeed, doctoral students who work full time or have career and/or family obligations may be limited in what they can do in the field. However, the fact that they cannot complete all of the activities within the standard length of time does not mean that these students cannot adopt or borrow principles of qualitative research traditions such as ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, or narrative inquiry. In later chapters, we will discuss strategies to scale methods and procedural steps in

the context of data collection and analysis in these traditions. If a dissertation study's research problem, purpose, and questions support the use of a research tradition *and* a student's interest in using such a tradition is strong then this is an appropriate approach. Doing so generally enhances a study's results and findings, usually brings more meaning to research activities, and connects students to a broader community of researchers connected to the tradition.

Connecting qualitative methodology to coursework.

One of the strongest mechanisms to negotiate dissertation methodology is program coursework. In fact, curricular offerings represent the most important and generally most efficient approach to not just develop the components of a methodological framework but complete the background work necessary to justify design and methods associated with a study. Generally speaking, the structure, sequence, and content related to courses in doctoral programs offer a range of options to students to navigate through the early development of a dissertation research framework and methodology. Indeed, standard courses tend to include theory, content, methods, and application or field-based courses—completed over a 2-to-3 year period. Looking at these courses through a dissertation methodological lens, they can be seen as follows:

- **Yearlong pro-seminars and semester content courses** in subfields or areas of study may support developing an understanding of major figures in the empirical and conceptual literature and facilitate initial and even more advanced development of a research problem, purpose, and questions.

- **Methods courses** cannot only build the knowledge base and skill set to design and execute an entire dissertation study but also allow students to develop the essential components of a methodological framework—from the assumptions and foundational concepts of research design to specific procedures for data collection and analysis. Frequently, these courses force students to get into the field and pilot instruments and experiment with procedures—all of which advance conceptually and sometimes pragmatically elements of dissertation methodology.

- **Field-based or research apprenticeship courses** may offer students opportunities to consult folks at potential data collection sites and in research settings similar to those that will form the locations where they will perform data collection. These experiences may allow students to build rapport with gatekeepers, flesh out research questions, pilot data collection instruments—interview protocols or descriptive observation guides, for example—or get to know the lay of the land at data collection sites.

Whether at the start of a program or near the end of curricular degree requirements, reading and written assignments, lectures and activities, and instructor and peer discussions can move students toward a firmer understanding of what they want to do in their studies in terms of design and methods and support actual work in the development of their dissertation methodology chapters. In fact, you can negotiate or situate dissertation-related work in almost all of these elements of program coursework. In a position in which students grasp what they will do or have an early or working draft of their dissertation methodology drafted, students tend to consult their dissertation chairs with a stronger position, which may potentially mitigate the effects of recommendations—or strong suggestions—related to methodology from their chair.
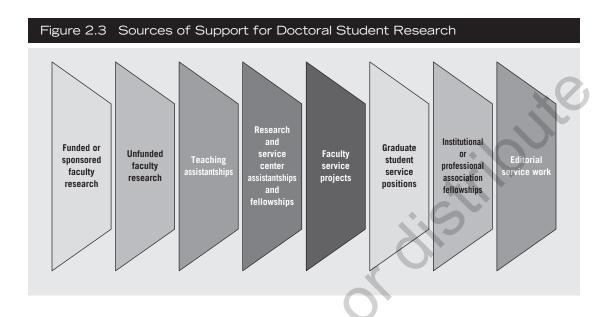
Key Questions to Ask Yourself

- How have I leveraged my coursework, campus work, and professional work to advance how I approach my dissertation methodology?

- What do I need to do to utilize these resources to support the development

of a design and methods for my methodology chapter, including negotiating methodological dimensions with my chair and/or committee?

Collaborating with faculty and peers to advance qualitative dissertation methodology.

In addition to coursework, the work that students do outside of class can relate directly to dissertation research. In fact, a range of options may be available to students on and off campus to support dissertation work, including the following (see Figure 2.3):

- **Funded or sponsored faculty research** generally supports graduate student dissertation research. Where faculty serve as a principal investigator or co-principal investigator on an extramurally funded project—whether publically sponsored or privately gifted—student opportunities in project administration positions and research assistantships emerge. These positions may offer students experiences in instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination. Moreover, students may learn about approaches to grant writing, proposal development, project implementation, and program evaluation. What is more, funding programs tend to run the gamut of

Figure 2.3 Sources of Support for Doctoral Student Research

academic fields and sometimes present transdisciplinary opportunities to collaborate—so the odds of extending a professional network and enhancing skills that are both applicable directly to dissertation research and marketable for careers in the academy accompany this work.

- **Unfunded faculty research** often forms significant research and writing experiences of graduate students, particularly with faculty advisors and/or committee members. When faculty offer students an opportunity to research, write, publish, and/or present their work, the insight, skills, and knowledge that they develop can be both meaningful and helpful to professional preparation and career development. Some examples of unfunded faculty research include book reviews, reference or encyclopedic entries, edited volume contributions (i.e., chapters), and monographs. With these scholarly activities, students often can apprentice with faculty and build academic capital related to publishing and/or presenting work in refereed journals, with academic publishers, and in professional associations—all of which supports skills needed to design and execute dissertation research projects.

- **Teaching assistantships** frequently offer graduate students opportunities to work in the classroom—directly with faculty and independently on their own. In some institutional and program contexts, professional faculty development in teaching and learning is available—providing rich resources to support graduate student identities and skills as instructors. While not all programs offer degree-applicable courses in instructional training, getting into the

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classroom in a teaching assistantship role and working with a faculty instructor directly with students represent some of the most important experiences for graduate students. Indeed, this work has far-reaching implications for careers in the academy and some related fields. For dissertation studies, teaching can lead to opportunities for students to learn how to integrate two prominent and related areas of academic practice—teaching and research. More broadly, possible skills that students develop as teaching assistants include learning how to manage the classroom, address student learning issues, developing material and activities that support a range of student learning styles and that accommodate students with disabilities, evaluating and scoring student work, developing strategies to address student violations of academic integrity policies, and operating within institutional grievance and disciplinary structures.

- **Research and service center assistantships and fellowships** may serve as prospective opportunities to develop similar skills as work in funded and sponsored faculty research projects. Outside of formal program and department positions such as research or teaching assistantships, institution- or program-affiliated research or services centers may employ graduate students to support institutional and contract projects. Often national in scope, these centers generally focus on a selected area of research and/or practice—perhaps related to students' dissertation research projects—so students can participate in a range of scholarly activities and events that connect them to scholars, educational leaders, policy makers, and/or leading thinkers in the field.

- **Faculty service projects**, such as university committee service, community service projects, or professional association service, may offer students opportunities to connect with new colleagues across campus, enhance their understanding of institutional operations, and build skills that could serve them well in academic or administrative positions—while offering students a chance to consult widely with folks who may potentially help shape their dissertation research.

- **Graduate student service positions** tend to connect students to new professional networks, whether on campus or in professional associations. Roles such as graduate student representative or liaison support the development of a broader view of program, departmental, institutional, or organizational processes and policies, which ultimately may support dissertation research development and overall early career faculty or administrator development.

- **Institutional or professional association fellowships** represent a chance for students to develop practical skill sets in an area of research and/or practice usually with an organization (if not with the college or

university) closely allied to students' program of study. Like with other opportunities, this type of work may allow for students to consult more broadly on issues related to dissertation research and further develop skills applicable to dissertation research contexts.

- **Editorial service work** with research and/or practitioner journals or academic publishers tends to support insight into issues that permeate academic research and writing—enhancing student skills to write their own dissertations. Here, what seems to work well relates to this logic: When you read research, you write research.

All of these opportunities generally support student dissertation work—from exploring a potential dissertation advisor and committee members to developing and refining dissertation ideas and advancing dissertation proposal and final dissertation development. Beyond academic program and career implications, a bonus for some of these positions relates to personal finance: tuition and fee reductions/remissions/waivers. My advice: Build your network and search for one or more of these opportunities. Sometimes you need to ask directly to find opportunities, and you should consider every chance to work collaboratively with faculty.

Situating methodology in professional practice.

In addition to program coursework, the connections between current and future career directions tend to lead methodology work. Indeed, professional positions—in full- or-part-time capacity—held prior to or during doctoral programs of study generally serve as immediately available and efficiently reached research settings. If you work in a field closely aligned with your program of study, your professional and organizational networks, office and professional colleagues, and partners with whom you work will likely be in positions to serve as gatekeepers or informants—supporting recruitment, data collection, and analytical interpretation. Here, the most supportive of and sympathetic colleagues in your network may best meet your dissertation research needs.

But what about considerations for backyard research, where you perform fieldwork in a familiar setting where you work now or used to work? This is a common question from advisees when I suggest their current or former work sites for their dissertations. Additional questions from students include the following: Isn't this just a convenience sample? Doesn't this weaken my study? These are valid questions that generally reflect critical engagement in the research process, but they also tend to originate from an epistemological understanding of social science research where empirical investigations need to follow from an arm's-length, so-called objective position. For doctoral students who use a qualitative approach in their dissertation studies, situating their studies in a setting with which they are familiar and where they have strong professional connections makes sense. Indeed, with the use of systematic sampling strategies to select participants (discussed in Chapter 5) and a range of procedures to mitigate the effects of the site

on you as the researcher and your researcher effects on participants (discussed in Chapter 8), you have the tools you need to credibly conduct dissertation research where you work (discussed as backyard research in Chapter 4). With strong ties to practice and support from colleagues where you work or worked, you will be in a position to submit to your chair specific research sites, sampling and recruitment strategies, and approaches to mitigate researcher effects.

Contextualizing Qualitative Methodology in Dissertation Research

The methodological decisions that researchers make tend to reflect academic training, historical and contemporary disciplinary traditions, institutional and departmental initiatives or centers, collegial or collaborative relationships, extramural funding, and personal beliefs and values. In fact, all of these factors shape what researchers investigate, and the research record of scholars generally shapes what they continue to do—the focus of their investigations and the approaches that they use in their research work. In turn, the research work that faculty advisors do may shape what their doctoral students do in their dissertation work. What is more, students' personal and professional interests—particularly in applied program contexts—and curricular areas of focus may inform the empirical and conceptual literature that they review and dissertation methodology that they ultimately develop.

Qualitative dissertation methodology as an approach to inquiry.

Whatever the factors that explain the specific features of a student's methodological framework for her or his dissertation work, he or she uses a distinct format and unique structure to articulate the steps in site selection, participant selection and recruitment, instrumentation, data collection and analysis procedures, and interpretation. What is so unique about dissertation methodology? What distinguishes dissertation methodology from approaches that appear in other scholarly works—including research articles in peer-reviewed journals—is the level of operational specificity and amount of procedural detail. Indeed, dissertations require an explicit, transparent format that lays out the steps that student researchers follow in implementing their research purposes and evaluating their research questions. This is a roadmap of sorts—a way to move from little to no information to interpreted patterns of information about a topic.

Why so many procedural details and such operational specificity? The function of dissertations in doctoral education—primarily as instructional tools and mechanisms to certify new members of the academy—and the dissertation proposal, where the methodology section appears, is in part a contract between a

student and dissertation committee. Accordingly, the contract terms spell out what you will do—and the methodology section "is usually the most carefully read section of the whole proposal" (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005, p. 75). And just as many contracts are written, so is the dissertation proposal and final dissertation—documenting student efforts to design an original investigation and present new knowledge. Methodologically speaking, the contract terms must include the answers to the following questions:

1. What is important to you—what you value—in investigations of human social life (design or tradition),

2. where will you go to gather information (research setting),

3. with whom will you talk with (research sample),

4. with what and how will you talk with them (data collection instruments and procedures),

5. how will you understand and interpret what they share (data analysis procedures), and

6. how will you describe your role in the study and account for your effects on whom you talk with and how you interpret what they share (researcher roles)?

This final section on research roles is extremely important in qualitative research contexts—but it is sometimes omitted from dissertation studies and studies that appear in published research journals. You can find reflexive research practices and applications of researcher roles in dissertation methodology in Chapter 8—so more later on this issue!

Given the general structure and content of the methodology section and expectations related to what students include in the presentation of design and methods, I argue that we can discuss dissertation methodology *as a methodology or an approach to inquiry*. More to the point: We can talk about qualitative dissertation methodology as a specific research approach. That is, we can identify and describe a unique set of assumptions and guiding principles associated with traditional qualitative methodologies like ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and so on and frame this approach as a methodology unique to dissertations—and qualitative dissertations in particular. This is not to say or imply that qualitative dissertation methodology imitates, replaces, or qualifies as traditional methodologies in dissertations. By no means! Rather, the use of these traditional methodologies in dissertation contexts allows student researchers to enhance procedural detail and further specify operational steps in their research work and extend dimensional practices of qualitative research that are generally implicit in published research studies: detailing procedural steps, protecting human subjects, articulating researcher roles, and developing reflexive strategies.

Guiding principles of qualitative dissertation methodology.

The traditional approaches to inquiry associated with qualitative research—ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory, for example—generally direct the design and methods in dissertation methodologies. As such, the assumptions about human social life and principles that guide methodological decisions tend to circumscribe what researchers propose to do in their studies. However, even the strictest interpretation or most faithful application of traditional methodologies generally do not require researchers to elaborate on each step of the process to implement a study or articulate who they are as researchers in the study and the protections of research participants. When administered in the field, researchers generally do not propose—and then follow—specific steps or events in the context of data collection and analysis. By contrast, in qualitative dissertation research, faculty chairs and committee members frequently expect students to outline a plan to gather and make sense of information while accounting for who they are in their studies.

Table 2.2 Conventional Dissertation Methodology Chapter Sections and Section Components

Component	Section Components
Introduction	Restate research purpose
	Restate research questions
	Describe chapter organization
Research tradition	Identify, describe, and rationalize case study research design
	Name, describe research tradition
	Describe how research tradition informs research purpose, questions, methods
Research setting	Describe your research setting
	Describe how you selected your site(s)
Data sources and sample	Describe your data sources
	Explain and justify your sample (research participants) and sampling strategy or strategies
	Describe characteristics of your sample (research participants)
	Describe how the rights of research subjects will be protected
Data collection instruments	Identify, describe, and justify the data collection instruments that you will use
Data collection procedures	Describe and justify data collection methods and procedures (steps)

Component	Section Components
Data analysis procedures	Describe the data analysis procedures that you will use in your study
Researcher roles	Describe your role(s) in your study
	Articulate your beliefs, biases, and assumptions about your study
	Articulate how you will safeguard or counter issues related to your beliefs, biases, and assumptions
Summary	Present a summary of your methods chapter

Beyond developing a plan as part of the proposal and working under the supervision of a chair and committee—which characterize dissertation research work more generally—qualitative dissertation methodology often requires students to follow an order, informed by broader standards in qualitative research, in laying out an approach to data collection and analysis. Indeed, Allison and Race (2004) argue that faculty advisors guide the expectations for specific data collected in a specific order. Qualitatively, the order follows something like what appears in Table 2.2, where a discussion of the overall design or tradition, with guidelines for what to include, informs the rest of the ordered plan, and in Table 2.3, where variations of the methodological components are seen as section titles. Take note now: The design or tradition permeates all of the components or sections in the order of the methodological framework! From this start, the design leads to two methodological components that identify and describe where and from whom data will be collected. Transitioning from research setting and sample to the tools and activities of data collection and analysis, the next three sections detail how and with what data will be collected and analyzed. While the final component of dissertation methodology in qualitative research can appear in virtually any part of the framework, the overall function is to situate the researcher in the office, on site, and in the field with a discussion of multiple roles. In fact, an inventory of researcher roles articulates who they are as researchers in their studies, including the following:

- their multiple roles within the context of the study, and

- beliefs, values, assumptions about the topic, participants, and expected findings.

Even though the chapter section titles that appear here may be used more generally, the conventional terms of sections of qualitative dissertation methodology tend to vary. As seen in Table 2.3, the terms used in this book generally vary and can appear in multiple forms in dissertation studies. While the forms may appear slightly or substantively different, they tend to retain the same meaning as to what they present.

Table 2.3 Conventional Sections and Variations of Qualitative Dissertation Methodology

Chapter title used in this book	Alternative chapter titles
Introduction	
Research tradition	Research design, design, design and tradition, approach
Research setting	Research setting and context, research site
Data sources and sample	Sample and data sources, research sample and data sources, data sources and research sample, sample, data sources, participants, research participants
Data collection instruments	Instruments and procedures, data collection instruments and procedures, instrumentation
Data collection procedures	Data collection, data collection methods, instruments and procedures, data collection instruments and procedures
Data analysis procedures	Data analysis, data analysis plan, analytical plan, analytical approach, data analysis and interpretation
Researcher roles	Roles of the researcher
Summary	Chapter summary, conclusion, concluding thoughts

Meaningfully Designing a Qualitative Methodological Framework: A Section-by-Section Approach

The ordered structure of dissertation methodology informs the section-by-section approach in this book. In fact, the organization of methodology chapters in dissertations—and qualitative dissertation in particular—directs the development of a framework that mirrors the natural movement from one chapter section to another. While not necessarily flowing from the first to the last section in a linear fashion, the treatment of one section of the methodology chapter at a time follows the general building blocks of qualitative approaches in dissertation studies: recruitment, data collection, and data analysis procedures built on a foundation of research design and researcher roles. With the selection and discussion of a research tradition that starts the chapter as the first section, the remaining chapter sections find a place in the sequence of presenting ideas in the chapter. In this way, the structure of the methodological framework develops from one section to the next—linear in long form and iterative in working out the details in and between each section.

The connections between each section are meaningful—not only the design elements that permeate chapter sections of the methodology, but also the procedural steps woven together as one activity leads to another and connects to broader

developments in research fieldwork. If sections could be grouped together by procedural phase, then the following general set of sections could be considered meaningfully—and often temporally—linked:

- research tradition;

- research setting and context, data sources, and research sample;

- data collection instrument, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures; and

- researcher roles.

Here, these sections can be seen as connected by both task and time: You select a research tradition and then move onto selections of a research setting and research participants. You end with the development of data collection instruments and procedures. All the while, you are working out who you are in your study through a reflexive process. Of course, these steps generally do not transpire in a strict order but rather in iterative steps.

An iterative approach to dissertation methodology development.

Developing dissertation methodology through chapter sections generally follows the work of qualitative researchers who use their study's background—problem, purpose, and question—to direct what they do in the field. While the conceptualization process of systematic approaches to investigations can be messy—first you identify the group or population of interest, then you think about steps in the context of data collection, then the problem or gap in what we know about all of this—when pen goes to paper or fingers to keyboard, the process takes a bit more shape and follows what we see in published journal articles, reports, or monographs. That is, one methodological component leads to and connects with another—flowing logically from one step of gathering and making sense of information to the next.

While methodology development is not as neat as what appears in publications or presentations, the evolutionary tendencies of research purpose and questions often inform changes over time and are shaped by and shape methodology. Indeed, if you had access to a researcher's or researchers' draft files that lead to a published journal article, for example, you would likely discover previous versions of research questions and

Source: © iStockphoto.com/ photovideostock

purpose and iterations of methodology. In student dissertation contexts, we see this pattern, too, as in the following example, listed by doctoral program year:

- *Years 1–2*: Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to examine the college experiences of African American females in their senior year at a Minority Serving Institution (Wright, September 2012, p. 2).

- *Years 2–3:* Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological case study will be to examine the college experiences of eight African American females who have persisted to their senior year at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is not a historically Black college or university (Wright, December 2012, p. 2).

- *Years 3+*: This study employs Critical Race Theory and Womanism to guide a qualitative examination of college experiences of African American women who have graduated or successfully persisted at a minority-serving institution (MSI) that is not classified as a historically Black college or university (HBCU) (Wright, 2014, p. x).

Key Points in Dissertation Methodology Development

- *First year and second years:* coursework, faculty advising, topic selection, literature search and review, research framework development

- *Second and third years:* coursework, faculty or dissertation advising, dissertation pilot or proposal development, IRB protocol draft and submission

- *Third year and beyond:* coursework, dissertation advising, and dissertation proposal development and hearing, fieldwork and data collection, data analysis and write up, and final dissertation development and defense

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You can see from this example, the student's research purpose evolves from a more general approach to examining academic entrepreneurialism to an exploration of the factors associated with the patterns of entrepreneurial community college faculty—using a grounded theory case study design.

In my work with doctoral students—including dissertation advisees—the developmental changes that mark dissertation research frameworks tend to happen alongside coursework and faculty advising in the first and second years of a program. During this time, students usually form initial dissertation topics and early versions of research purpose and questions. Once assigned a dissertation advisor and through a significant portion of coursework in the second and third years of a program, dissertation work tends to focus on dissertation pilot research and proposal development, where the study's background and context come alive

and inform work in the methodological framework. In the third program year and beyond, the combination of any outstanding classes needed to fulfill degree requirements, dissertation advising, and dissertation proposal development and hearing, fieldwork and data collection, data analysis and write up, and final dissertation development shape the sections of the methodology chapter.

The curricular and research experiences and ritualistic events are generally associated with substantive growth as student scholars—and changes in dissertation methodology reflect this relationship. In the following example, you can see how the evolution of research questions parallels the students' progression through the program:

- *Years 1–2*: How is information about academic dishonesty communicated to students? What formal discussion is taking place? What efforts can be taken to address this issue? (Bluestein, September 2010, p. 2).

- *Years 2–3:* How does the faculty–student relationship cultivate shared norms with respect to academic dishonesty? What factors of the faculty–student relationship mitigate academic dishonesty? (Bluestein, December 2010, p. 2).

- *Years 3+*: What are the effects of the student–faculty interaction on student behavior related to academic honesty? What factors of the student–faculty relationship facilitate student academic dishonesty? (Bluestein, 2012, p. 7).

Here, you can see the transition from more general research questions to a set of two questions directly related to the phenomenon under investigation and linked to a qualitative research tradition (in this case, grounded theory). In a final example, you can see the development of a qualitative research tradition over the course of a 3-year doctoral program in educational leadership:

- *Years 1–2*: I am seeking to know the nature of the knowledge that will be discovered through the portraiture methodology. (Bailey, October 2010, p. 1).

- *Years 2–3:* Portraiture as a methodological framework seeks to understand systems of power and differencing aspects of culture by exploring diverse voices. (Bailey, December 2010, p. 4).

- *Years 3+*: Coupled with validation theory, portraiture methodology positions this study to illuminate the voices from underserved and minority populations. (Bailey, 2014, p. 8).

In this case, the student moves from an initial statement on the use of portraiture methodology to a description of the research tradition in relation to the exploration of underserved student populations.

Table 2.4 Doctoral Student Dissertation Samples by Name (Ordered Alphabetically by Last Name), Year, Title, Design, and Procedures

Name	Year	Title	Design	Methods
Anna Badalyan	2012	*Program Review Institutionalization as an Indicator of Institutional Effectiveness in the California Community Colleges*	Multisite case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, participant observations, document reviews
Jack L. Bagwell	2014	*Exploring the Leadership Practices of Elementary Principals in Program Improvement Schools Through a Distributed Leadership Framework*	Ethnographic case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, focus group interviews, participant observations
Van Bailey	2012	*The Tapestry of Black Female Leadership: Study of the Culture of Student Leadership in a Locally Sponsored, Culturally Based Student Organization*	Portraiture methodology	Semi-structured personal interviews, structured journaling
Genevieve Bertone	2016	*Exploring the Role of Growth Mindset in the Transfer Experience of Community College Students*	Grounded theory	Semi-structured personal interviews
Stephanie Bluestein	2012	*Qualitative Inquiry of the Impact of Student-Faculty Interaction on Academic Dishonesty in the Community College*	Grounded theory case study	Semi-structured personal interviews
Porsha Boyd	2014	*Athletic Cheers and Academic Assists: Examining Black Male Basketball Players' Social Relationships at a Division-I Institution and Their Effect on Academic Success*	Grounded theory case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, background questionnaire
Amy Fara Edwards	2016	*The Role of Gender in Higher Education Leadership*	Multiple case study	Semi-structured personal interviews
Hawa Ghaus-Kelley	2014	*Exploring the Critical Learning Moments of Women Community College Executives: A Phenomenological Study of Transformative Educational Leadership Practices*	Phenomenological case study	In-depth, semi-structured personal interviews
Todd Hampton	2015	*Effects of Academic Success Courses on Academic Self-Efficacy Among Students in a Comprehensive Public Four-Year Regional University*	Grounded theory case study	Document reviews

Name	Year	Title	Design	Methods
William David Harris	2015	*Changing the Lens: Mentors and Their Effect on Novice Teacher Attitudes Towards Student Achievement*	Grounded theory case study	Semi-structured personal interviews
Shannon Johnson	2013	*Perceptions of College Internship Coordinators: Services and Practices That Most Effectively Facilitate Internships of Academic and Professional Value*	Multi-site case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, survey
Raquel Michel	2014	*Latino College Students' Transition Experiences From a Charter High School to College: An Ethnography of Social Preparedness and Familial Support*	Ethnographic case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, ethnographic interviews, participant observations
Brianna Nix	2015	*Impact of Policy on Education: A Look Into the Academic Success of Foster and Homeless Youth*	Grounded theory	Semi-structured personal interviews, document reviews
Paul Payne	2012	*Pilot School Leaders' Experiences in Innovation*	Institutional ethnography	Semi-structured personal interviews
Adrienne Peralta	2014	*Transitioning From Alternative to Traditional Public Schools: Understanding Latino Middle School Student Experiences*	Ethnographic case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, ethnographic interviews, participant observations
Donna Randolph	2014	*Examination of Student-Faculty Interaction in STEM Research Projects Among Transfer Students of Color*	Ethnographic case study	Semi-structured personal interviews, ethnographic interviews, participant observations
Dorothy Sherman Smith	2016	*An Examination of Factors That Shape Outcomes for African American Male Student Athletes in Community Colleges*	Case study	Semi-structured personal interviews
Deanecia Wright	2014	*Persistence as Resistance: Race, Gender, and the Experiences of Black Women at Minority-Serving Institutions*	Critical case study	In-depth, semi-structured personal interviews

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Flexibility within conventional qualitative dissertation methodology.

A section-by-section approach has limitations: an implied linear progression from one section to the next (even though there are iterative steps within and between sections), a structured chapter framework and ordered sequence of sections, and a use of specific terms with little variation. While all of these characteristics distinguish the section-by-section approach used in this book, they tend to reflect the conventional approach to qualitative dissertation methodology (which tends to mirror broader social science research standards). What is more, this approach generally offers a flexible, fluid space to allow for adaptation across program requirements, advisor preferences, and student interest in both a traditional format of dissertation methodology and newer or emerging approaches of qualitative dissertation research.

The key features throughout the book offer opportunities to relate concepts to your own work and use student samples as guides to shape what you are doing or will do in your study. In fact, the use of multiple terms to describe dimensions of qualitative dissertation methodology, application of practices in developing a methodology chapter, and presentation of a diverse set of doctoral student samples (Table 2.4) moves you through a building-block framework. With the thrust of the work to draft, revise, and finalize, a qualitative dissertation methodology seems to take place at the granular level—how to do this, when to do that, why take these steps—using elements of a step-by-step approach will support your overall efforts. With the long view of the research framework to inform the major decisions and minute details of the methodology chapter, the resources that you can borrow to sketch out a roadmap and plan for fieldwork may be found in this book and work well for you.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter examined the historical and contemporary contexts of dissertations. Looking at the foundations of current and emerging approaches to dissertation research in graduate education, the chapter focused on the historically and socially reproduced formats and rituals in dissertation research. Here, considerations of how dissertation research has served college and university faculty and functioned to support multiple activities in the academy and professional associations appeared in the chapter. Then, the chapter moved on to a closer look at what distinguishes dissertation research—especially conventional dissertation formats—from other types of scholarly research activities. Moving toward the approach to methodological development of a dissertation in this book, the chapter explored foundational elements of methodology in qualitative inquiry, including how methods and procedures work in a study. With a specific focus on the five-chapter monograph dissertation and explored features of book-length formats, the chapter discussed new and emerging dissertation forms and discussed patterns of digital and other technology-mediated forms of dissertation research. The chapter ended where it started: with the conventional dissertation format as a section-by-section approach to developing a qualitative dissertation methodology chapter.

QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. What about dissertation research appeals to you? What interests you? What do you dislike? Why qualitative research? With which design and procedural features of qualitative research do you identify? Why do you gravitate toward them in your coursework and research work?

2. How will you proceed through the development of your qualitative dissertation methodology? How will you work with the sections of the methodology chapter? How will you order them? What connections will appear between chapter sections?

Visit the SAGE website at **http://www.sagepub.com/qualitative-dissertation-methodology/book251768** for videos featuring Nathan Durdella on formulating qualitative research questions and writing a qualitative research proposal.