



OUR RESEARCH STORY

A Prelude

PATHS TOWARD RESEARCH

We begin this book with a multivoiced story of the four people whose paths converged to produce this text. Instead of speaking to you in a distant, third-person voice, we would like to make connections on a more personal level. This may not be an approach that you are familiar with when it comes to research textbooks. But since we are taking a *dialogic* approach to strive for our student-centered intention, we find it necessary to bring ourselves and our stories to the foreground as we open the text. As in any dialogue, it is important to know who are the people talking. Also, when we say “dialogue,” the concept goes beyond an actual dialogic situation where people go back and forth with one another. For us, dialogue is a larger concept, where people are engaged in communication explicitly or tacitly. For instance, reading is, also, such a communicative context, where dialogue takes place between the author and the reader, and within the readers themselves. Dialogue is an important feature that we cherish in our approach. In fact, there are various places where we will continue to bring our stories into this text. We hope to make connections and honor the relational nature of social inquiry, which we will unpack later. We also hope that our stories might inspire you to think about what brought you to your current area of study and career orientation. What does “research” mean to you? What do you find intriguing and meaningful to inquire about? From here we can start to discuss the nature of social inquiry and research practices through dialogues.

Barbara’s Story

I have always been a shy people-watcher, wanting to understand from the outside. Impossible in some ways, inevitable in others. Watching from the outside versus understanding

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from my own experience was a difference between somehow identifying things *about* the person versus identifying *with* the person I was observing. Early on, I had come to associate research with the former, not the latter.

In high school, I had personal reactions to my biology class when I was asked to dissect animals. As a longtime vegetarian, I actually felt sick to my stomach when asked to take apart the dead animals in a lab. I did not know where the animals had come from, nor why their lives had been sacrificed so I could do science. This experience again reinforced the idea that to do science was to distance one's feelings and self from the object of inquiry. Were my moral inclinations antithetical to science? Was the idea of knowledge in the service of good to override my individual moral sensibilities?

Also, during my youth, the constitutionality of the death penalty was being debated. I was deeply interested in this debate. I remember tussling with a distinction between the facts and the norms. Could science help us with issues like this?

In my early 20s, I was a special education teacher. As part of my training I was taught to use single-subject designs, or applied behavioral analysis, in my teaching. Single-subject design works by describing observable behaviors in response to particular educational interventions, usually one child at a time, avoiding any efforts to understand what was going on for the child. One was just to make notes about exactly what was observable. Understanding what the child was experiencing was considered irrelevant to explaining the behavioral outcomes of the child. One's intentions to best serve the child's educational needs through this approach demanded a suspension of those personal motivations in order to abstract oneself as the observer from the child's behavior as the observed.

This way of thinking about research, where the procedures themselves force an unquestioned distinction between the researcher and what is being researched, permeated my early ways of thinking about scientific inquiry. In this way of thinking, the researcher is completely *different* than the subject of her research. What connected the researcher to the research subject was the use of precise and legitimate procedures and instruments. But when I was actually engaged with a student, trying to figure out what was going on, I did not really experience this strict separation. The main image-metaphor I had for thinking of research in this way was the scientist in a lab coat looking through a microscope and accurately depicting what she saw. But, alas, that way of thinking about research contrasts with how I think about research now. As an activist researcher, I think of all research as engaged—not disengaged, as informed by particular perspectives rather than neutral, and as recursive and creative rather than strictly linear and procedural. I see that research is never just about the facts but will always necessarily and positively include the values through which the facts become both relevant and interesting. The main metaphor I have for thinking about research now is a conversation. Imagine people bringing

questions to a table to talk. This is my image of good research. This looks really different than that lab-coated scientist looking through a microscope!

Peiwei's Story

I could not imagine I would be doing what I'm doing today 15 years ago, when I was a freshman studying chemistry in China. Despite excelling in language, history, and literature, I was expected to pursue a career as a scientist by my parents and teachers. In my home country, a narrow view of "success" prevailed that favored "hard" sciences over "soft" ones. I tacitly inherited this cultural value, studied chemistry in college, and then moved along the pipeline to become a doctoral student in biochemistry at Indiana University in 2003. I'm tremendously grateful for my cross-cultural experience, which created a critical space for self-reflection. I realized that blindly following a path defined by others would not make a meaningful life. I had to attend to the part of me that yearned to be expressed. I consider that this ongoing journey of self-discovery is itself a fundamental inquiry process, which perhaps always accompanies any formal inquiries and research endeavors that I'm drawn to engage with. To me, the process of pursuing knowledge is always shaped by our unique and similar life experiences and thus from a certain vantage point. It carries a deep interest of knowing who we are, why we are doing what we are doing, and what is a good and just life for ourselves and others.

As a little girl, I remember how much I loved to watch my parents, two literature majors, reciting lines from *Hamlet*—vibrant and full of passion. It resonated in me the desire to experience people and the world with sensitivity and intuition, which eventually led me to counseling psychology and inquiry methodology. Thanks to the open and nourishing learning environment at Indiana, I never experienced "research" as something that is external to other aspects of my life. It is a constant unfolding journey to inquire about human nature and the universe with openness and curiosity.

Research is also a process of critical thinking and reflection that does not take things for granted. It always involves asking questions, including of ourselves and our ideas. This helps us closely examine our assumptions and biases as individuals and as a society, to explicate and challenge oppressing cultural norms and social structures, and to create conditions through actions toward positive social change. In this sense, research is not just an academic activity but also a way of thinking and being integrated, guided by specific values and commitments to be in the world and relate to others. This requires open and democratic communication among multiple voices, and a willingness to reach understanding with *the other*, especially those who have very different views from our own. This understanding of research certainly has shaped my identity as a scholar, a teacher, and a person, and how I approach this book.

Karen's Story

Research is a word I have heard all my life. Both of my parents are scientists; from a young age I heard terminology associated with “scientific research,” and was encouraged to take math and natural science courses all through high school. Even though I was fairly certain my passions didn’t lie in these areas, it was a point of pride for me to be one of only two females in an advanced math class as a high school senior. The support and encouragement I received from family and teachers allowed me to avoid feeling that I couldn’t do well because I was a girl.

So it was with some sense of “letting others down” that I turned my attention as a college student to areas about which I was much more passionate. As I thought about who I might be letting down by doing so, their (possible) perspectives became less important to me than focusing on the things I felt would help me engage in work that might contribute to positive social change. This was the thought that initially motivated my graduate studies as well, which I began in an applied professional field.

In fact, it was only partway through my master’s degree that I began to think again about the concept of “research” and what it meant. Questions about the impact of the professional field I was involved in led me to my PhD studies and to asking questions about what “impact” meant and how it could be understood. Even at that point, my only real framework for thinking about research was research in the natural sciences. However, as I dug deeper into my graduate work and thought about how to use research to contribute to positive social change, I found my perspective on what research could look like expanding in ways that really resonated with how I see myself in the world. Research and approaches to research have become not secondary to the substantive issues on which I focus professionally, but an integral part of my thought process whenever I think about a problem and how I might solve it. I am reflective about the approaches I take to applied work and about ways of integrating research and application in ways that are consistent with the social justice orientation I bring to my professional, academic, and personal life. My vision of “research” is that it is not only iterative and nonneutral (rather than “linear” and “objective”), but also that it is always contributing to a conversation that, ultimately, is about shaping the world in which we live.

Pengfei's Story

I remember that when I was a kid, I began to explore the world with great curiosity. Living in a small, isolated town in North China, I did not have many opportunities to get exposed to various forms of cultural life or scenic natural views. One thing that really compensated for this disadvantage was reading, which opened a window for the little me to “travel” imaginatively to other countries or to “talk” with great people who had passed away centuries ago. I was so into reading that I spent most of the spare

time in my childhood diving into novels and poems. I found myself fascinated by the myriad of experiences that the characters in the books had gone through. I resonated with these experiences so much that sometimes I almost felt like I was living in dual worlds—the world of reality and the world of my books. Now, after many years, I have grown up and become a researcher, yet the interest in people’s life experiences has continued, which constantly drives me to read more, think more, and talk more with people.

Like many of my colleagues in academia, I can always feel deep-seated anxiety to produce more. The reasons are rather realistic: One needs to graduate, to find a job, to support her family, to get tenure, and so on. However, I find that doing research merely for these reasons is not the path worth pursuing. For me, doing research is connected to much deeper needs in my life, such as communicating with people, learning insights from them, and working with them to make the world better. Yes, making the world better—this is where my intercultural experience comes into play. Because of the opportunity to live in very distinctive cultures such as China and the United States, I have noticed how different people understand what a “better world” is and how we can make it happen. As I am learning and challenging American culture, some values that I used to hold firmly have started to shake. For instance, I am reluctant to say “democracy is a universal value good for every country in the world,” and I have become aware of how my understanding of modern Chinese history is distorted by political power. Doing research, teaching research, and writing about research in this sense are also ways for me to wrestle with my being in-between two cultural worlds and to forge a better future.

Coming Together

Now, we hope that you have learned a little bit about each of us—what drew us to do research and what research means to us. We open the book with these stories to acknowledge that research does not happen in a vacuum. Research is never an endeavor separated from who we are and our life experiences. What is your story of understanding “research”? What are your thoughts on what research is and should be? You may also ponder how we came together to write this book. What is our approach? In fact, the very idea of this book grew out of a research collaboration where we wanted to understand how our own students conceptualize “research.”

Back in 2011, three of us (Peiwei, Karen, and Pengfei) were doctoral students in the Inquiry Methodology Program at Indiana University (IU) Bloomington, where Barbara is a faculty member. As indicated in our stories, we all encountered moments when we experienced disconnects from our learning processes. Some of those disconnections involved a common image of “research” sharply separated from our everyday lives and

professional experiences. As graduate students, we were expected to learn *about* highly specialized and expert knowledge such as intermediate and advanced statistics. These are important and helpful topics to learn about. However, such knowledge is often positioned as if it exists independently of who we are, and the learning process demands very little self-reflection or conscious effort to integrate our learning into our lives as a whole. But intuitively, we all felt research is more than what we knew and were told earlier in our studies. Fortunately, in the Inquiry Methodology Program at IU, we experienced an alternative way of understanding and practicing research. It was cultivated by an *inquiry-oriented* culture that creates space for both *knowing* and *being*, research and practice, as well as the connections between theoretical/philosophical insights and concrete social issues. Being exposed to two different cultures of inquiry at times created tensions in our experiences. But this also deepened our understanding and primed open critical spaces for new visions.

Later in our doctoral training, Peiwei, Karen, and Pengfei all had opportunities to teach a graduate-level research methodology course and to participate in a teaching affinity group facilitated by Barbara, who also taught this same introductory course on a regular basis. Together, we became more aware of various kinds of disconnects our students experienced in relation to the notion of “research.” Most of our graduate students identified themselves as practitioners in applied fields such as teaching, instructional technology, counseling, language education, educational leadership, higher education administration, student affairs, and so on. Even for those students who anticipated becoming researchers themselves, we discovered that their learning experiences could flounder without some way of anchoring this knowledge *about* research to the *lived* experiences they brought with them.

As we paid closer attention to our students’ understandings of “research,” we began to notice how their conceptions influenced the ways they identified (or not) with the class and their level of engagement (and lack thereof). For example, many students came to the class with preconceived images of “research” as “experiments,” “numbers,” “statistics,” or “dry and boring research articles.” They had a hard time connecting those ideas with their experiences as teachers, counselors, educational specialists, or administrators—the very passions that brought them to graduate school in the first place. Many of them considered research to be something academic experts do, and not something they themselves might participate in through their daily (professional and personal) practices. Consequently, they were not too motivated to learn and considered the course somewhat superfluous to their own goals, needs, and interests. Do you resonate with any of those experiences? Have you ever experienced similar disconnects?

Through teaching and conversations about our teaching, we could not help but wonder: Are we (students and instructors alike) embedded in a certain educational

climate that favors a narrow way of thinking about research (e.g., primarily as controlled experiments or statistical analyses, carried out by someone in a lab coat)? If so, how was this culture formed? What has shaped the dynamic where students are positioned as passive recipients of specialized knowledge by the experts? Is this all that research is about? If not, what can or should research be? Is there a need to transform this rather hierarchical understanding of research toward a more inclusive and relational one?

These questions inspired us to further explore our students' conceptions of research. We were particularly interested in students' perspectives, since *your* voices were often missing from both the existing literature and pedagogical discussions. For example, we were able to find only scant literature on graduate students' perceptions of "research." In fact, this body of literature seems to further reinforce the idea that "research" is a canon of knowledge one must acquire as a graduate student irrespective of their own conceptualizations. We found this very troublesome. Ultimately, our desire to learn more from our students, and the desire to move beyond the image portraying research as a set canon of information to be learned, paved the way for our long-term research collaboration, pursuing a *student-centered* approach to teaching research methodology.

Emerging Research

This text is a direct "outcome" of this collaboration, initiated in 2011 during a dinner conversation between Karen and Peiwei. As they shared their respective teaching experiences, they were struck by the similar challenges they had both encountered. They were both interested in student engagement in the introductory research methodology course and the tension that surfaced between students' identities and the course design. Their concerns and curiosities quickly found echoes in Barbara and Pengfei's experiences. The four of us decided to form a research team and carved out a research study, which we called "Researching 'Research.'" The key question we asked was: How do graduate students in an introductory research methods course conceptualize the notion of "research"? In fact, as a sidenote, we will unpack and draw from this particular project to situate our discussions throughout this textbook. You will hear directly from some of the students in our class, although the excerpts and quotes that we took from student assignments sometimes have been modified, shortened, or condensed for clarity. Also, we have published our work in a couple of research articles (Li, Ross, Zhao, & Dennis, 2017; Ross, Dennis, Zhao, & Li, 2017). Interested readers can find full references in the Further Readings section at the end of the chapter.

This research collaboration provided a catalyst and useful insights for us to imagine, conceptualize, and develop this textbook. Immersing ourselves in student participants'

own narratives made us further question basic assumptions about research. For example, we often say that the purpose of research is to “produce knowledge,” but what is the nature of what we consider “knowledge”? Why do we even want to produce knowledge? What types of knowledge can or should be generated? How can we generate knowledge that is genuine and valid? Who benefits from knowledge production? For what and for whom is it produced? Who should be producing knowledge? Who is producing knowledge?

These underlying questions have been intimately embedded in the process of designing and writing this textbook. These questions touch on various aspects of research, including understanding the nature, purpose, and process of research, and the relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the larger social, cultural, and political contexts. They also bring up key concepts such as epistemology, identity, intersubjectivity, validity, ethics, and more, which we will unpack across various chapters. You can count on these key questions and concepts to resurface in the text in various iterations. There is no need to worry if those terms do not sound familiar at this point.

MAKING IMPLICIT EXPLICIT: OUR INTENTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Before we introduce the specifics of the book, we find it important first to walk you behind the scenes. We would like to share some of the major decisions and dilemmas with which we wrestled as we developed this book. By making our assumptions and values explicit, we hope that you gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the book.

Holding Complexity

First, we anticipate that many readers are new to the topic of research methodology. Therefore, there is a need to introduce the conventional foundations of social inquiry so that novice research readers can build a platform to enter the dialogue. Meanwhile, our challenge here is to avoid, on the one hand, perpetuating a fundamentalist orientation that promotes the belief that one particular approach to research is the *best* or the *only* way to generate legitimate knowledge. Conventional or classic knowledge is vulnerable to this fundamentalist orientation because it is often taken for granted as a given. On the other hand, we also want to avoid throwing readers into the deep complexity of social research without sufficient scaffolding built from the “classics.” As a whole, our intention is to hold both sides and to strive for a dynamic balance. That is, we work to facilitate

dialogue between canonical knowledge and other perspectives, honoring the open nature of knowing and facilitating critical thinking about the very notion of knowing.

As an example of this intention of holding complexity, we introduce traditional methodological terms such as “validity,” “data collection,” and “research designs,” but we also reflect on them through a set of principles, like inclusivity, dialogue, and power analysis. In this way, conventions are not taken up as a given without being reflected on and questioned. Similarly, this text crosses disciplinary boundaries of social sciences. We draw out shared concerns and core concepts of social inquiry across disciplines and fields of practice. In contrast, many existing texts are situated primarily within a particular field or discipline (e.g., education, psychology, health sciences, etc.). We acknowledge that substantive disciplinary differences are important to attend to, and yet we hope to focus on methodological concepts and practices that may transcend disciplines.

Bridging Binaries

To hold complexity also means to be vigilant about the potential traps of entrenched binaries. In this text, we aspire to bridge what we view as a somewhat superficial divide between qualitative and quantitative research. The demarcation between the qualitative and quantitative research “camps” has important historical roots (more discussion in Chapters 5 and 7), and the quantitative and qualitative research traditions have different methodological underpinnings. And yet we disagree with common perceptions that essentialize those differences and make their boundary unnecessarily rigid. We believe that holding the differences while examining the potential for unification can help us more critically and creatively engage with research endeavors.

Thus, we envision a nonbinary approach to inquiry, reconceptualizing research not as primarily anchored to specific methods or a set of procedures. Foremost, we view research as a fluid inquiry process that has both universal and context-specific features (more discussion in Chapters 8 and 9). We strive to hold both aspects. A prefigured separation between quantitative and qualitative research risks closing up the potential for a “meta”-level understanding that enables us to examine underlying assumptions associated with research. With this exploration, we can more critically recognize differences and make fluid or porous seemingly fixed borders.

At the same time, we would like to shift away from understanding knowledge through picture-like metaphors—for instance, thinking of research studies as “building blocks” that accumulate in time to form a larger knowledge base. This kind of metaphor implies that knowledge is like solid and independent “pieces” that are “out there” once produced. Together, they can lead to a more “complete” picture. In contrast, one possible alternative

FIGURE 1.1 ● Metaphor of Knowledge: Building Blocks vs. Dialogue


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is to think of knowledge as claims that people make. From this perspective, a knowledge claim is not an entity-like object but a form of communication made by a speaker, which always has an implicit relational intent. Thus, to develop knowledge requires that we bring competing perspectives into dialogue with one another. Something new might emerge from the endless process of disagreement, persuasion, and agreement. We also would like to acknowledge that any knowledge claim, including what we say in this text, needs to stay open to being questioned, challenged, and being brought into further discussion. Any claim is potentially fallible. Thus, for us, knowledge necessitates a process of continued reflection and dialogues. The metaphor of research articulated by Barbara in her story, as people talking together, serves as the overarching metaphor for this text as well.

In practice, to bridge binaries means that we do not “stick” to any end of the “pole”; we dynamically move in-between the poles, wandering in the “gray area.” Here are a few concrete applications in the text guided by this intention:

- We strive to honor the inherent connection between theory and practice. In our view, theory serves an important function of explaining, illuminating, raising awareness, and so on. But theory should never be separated from concrete contexts of practice. Thus, we anchor all of our theoretical and conceptual discussions in either ordinary circumstances or concrete professional and research contexts, where we hope readers find resonance.
- We want this text to be conceptually strong, but we also see the need to include the “nuts and bolts” and “how-to” types of content material (e.g., guidelines, resources, checklists, technical/procedural information, examples, and so on). But space is limited. We address this inevitable tension through deliberately foregrounding and backgrounding certain materials. For example, we use the

Appendix feature to accommodate supplemental materials that are important to include but may clutter the conceptual integrity of the main text.

- We debated whether to develop a glossary for the text. We certainly find it important to help readers more easily track research concepts and key terms. But we also worry that they may see how *we* define research concepts as the only or best way. As a result, we may mislead readers and counter our own understanding that concepts can be interpreted, defined, and applied very differently in the research community. Divergent views are vital for the livelihood of our thinking. We would like to convey the importance of embracing multiple perspectives. Therefore, we decided to include a glossary but stress that the glossary is more a *conceptual* than a *technical* attempt to articulate key research terms. Also, our definitions are always open to alternative articulations, and they may even evolve across chapters as those concepts grow more complex. We encourage readers to use the glossary in this open and dynamic way, and perhaps even add your own understanding as you gain confidence.

Accessible but Not Simplified

In this text, we are committed to a *student-centered* approach. We intend to write this text as a conversation *with* you rather than talking *to* you or *at* you. We also feel strongly that this student-centered approach does not mean *student-simplified*. For us, being student-centered is primarily a pedagogical issue, related to developing ways to inspire motivation and create resonance. Student-centered does *not* mean “watering down” or oversimplifying the content or writing level, but it does involve eliminating jargon and non-engaging style of writing to make the text accessible. In fact, we would argue that learning to hold complexity of ideas without quickly flattening and simplifying is an essential learning outcome for graduate students, because this metaskill is a key component of critical thinking. Being able to think and act with complexity can go a long way in your professional and life experiences.

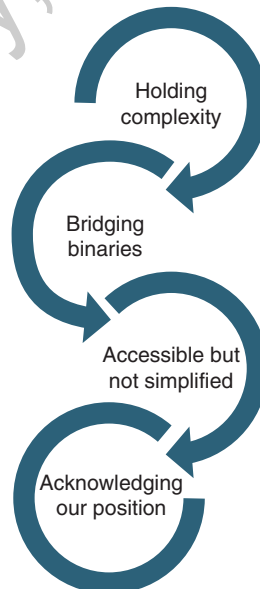
Meanwhile, it is likely that you may run into some dense and challenging content in this text. We hope that those moments may not stem primarily from writing accessibility in terms of the overuse of jargon and abstract expressions. Instead, we anticipate that this dense and challenging feeling will likely relate to the need to wrestle with and grasp complex ideas, and to a demand for critical reflection. We firmly believe that graduate students are capable of thinking with complexity, and as a matter of fact, yearn for deeper and critical understanding. To be clear, we surely fall short in places, even with the best intention of striving for a balance between accessibility and complexity. We are open to hearing from you and learning about how we have succeeded or failed to realize this goal.

Acknowledging Our Position

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge that we do not aim for a “bird’s eye view” that encompasses all different schools of thought and ideas, or to offer you a *complete* picture of research. We disagree with the common understanding (or myth) that knowledge should be or can be “value-free” or neutral. Our stance is that the act of producing knowledge is always already embedded within a constellation of interests and value orientations, and from a given position. Carrying values and interests is inevitable and does not automatically equal to “bias,” although research certainly can be biased (more discussions on this in Chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and 16).

All four of us share a critical orientation toward research, significantly influenced by critical theories and feminist theories such as the work of German social theorist Jürgen Habermas. This stance guides how we approach this text in a fundamental way (more discussions on our theoretical and philosophical assumptions in Chapters 2 and 5). At the same time, we consciously work to avoid centering our perspective *at the expense of* exposing readers to other orientations/possibilities. We would like to keep our values and assumptions explicit so that readers can disagree with our views and we can enter a dialogue. As a matter of fact, a genuine critical approach welcomes multiple views, disagreements, and critiques so that self-reflection and further dialogues are possible. Figure 1.2 sums up our four guiding intentions in the process of generating this text.

FIGURE 1.2 ◆ Guiding Intentions for the Text



ABOUT READING THIS BOOK

Readers may have already noticed that we are taking a unique approach to this textbook. A typical research methods textbook usually starts with a definition of research, and then a rather linear process of choosing a research question, deciding on a research design, collecting and analyzing data, and writing up research. Research is often portrayed as a type of specialized knowledge that stands on its own. Students are positioned to absorb such knowledge passively. In contrast, this text grounds the discussion of research in ordinary experiences and foregrounds your own understanding and feelings about research as informed by your experiences. We move *away from* a didactic view of knowledge that suggests knowledge exists external to your experience and who you are. Instead, we move *toward* the premise that learning and knowledge are interactional and relational, always forming, and formed through intimate connections to your life experiences.

To create a more organic learning process, we use a *dialogical* approach in the text that draws on the concept of “dialectic” as originally discussed by the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (see Hegel, 1971).¹ Dialectical ideas are also prominent in the works of other scholars such as sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (see Du Bois, 1920) and Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (see Freire, 1972). In line with this approach, we first introduce and explain concepts as they arise within the context of a given chapter. As we return to these concepts further along in the book, we add complexity and nuance to how they are discussed. Our goal, as we noted above, is not to bring you as readers to a point of “complete” understanding, but rather, through reading this text, to begin an ongoing, holistic, and nuanced conversation about the meaning of research. This is also the reason why we intentionally *stay away* from putting the emphasis on clear-cut, singular, and fixed definitions of terms and concepts—something you might be expected to memorize in some other learning contexts. We hope to create a space for dialogue and the development of a deeper understanding about research concepts over time.

¹ The essence of Hegel’s dialectical approach, which builds upon the work of earlier philosophers and is discussed most extensively in Part I of his *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, is the idea that ideas or concepts are defined in relation to other ideas or concepts. According to Hegel, we initially understand concepts in a “fixed,” stable way. However, this understanding is soon followed by a realization that our initial understanding of a concept is one-sided; in this moment, our understanding is destabilized. Hegel suggests that our initial, fixed understanding then “self-subulates,” or passes into its opposite. In other words, the one-sidedness of an initial moment of understanding leads to a destabilization of that understanding that then leads to a new, opposite moment of understanding that negates previous understanding, while at the same time preserving the essence of that initial understanding within a new, broader understanding of the concept. The dialectical approach is reflected in this textbook in the way that we expand upon, complicate, and draw new, broader understandings of concepts into our discussion throughout the text.

Cluster Structure

We organize the textbook into three “clusters,” each consisting of several chapters (see Figure 1.3 for a visual overview). Our choice to use the term *cluster* instead of *section* or *part* is intentional. For us, “cluster” signifies a nonhierarchical and nonlinear relationship among the content domains, while emphasizing the internal connections between those domains. Each cluster has its own emphasis, while a set of underlying key concepts is progressively “thematized” across clusters. This idea of *thematizing* is also illustrated in Figure 1.4: Each cluster, like a single layer of the spirals, has a distinct form. And yet, various clusters, like layers of spirals, are deeply embedded in one another. Together, they spiral as a boundless whole, where a previous movement becomes increasingly unpacked and *made explicit* in the *next* movement. Concepts become *thematized* through such progressive movements across chapters and clusters.

Specifically, Cluster 1 introduces a number of “big picture” issues that are relevant across the full spectrum of the research process. Each chapter in Cluster 1 simultaneously introduces new ideas and builds on concepts addressed in earlier chapters. Key concepts discussed and synthesized in Cluster 1 include knowledge, epistemology, meaning, criticalism, partisanship, intersubjectivity, reflection, issues of identity, research ethics, social norms, structure and power, and validity (see Chapters 2–7). Building upon Cluster 1, Clusters 2 and 3 explore the research process. Chapters in Cluster 2 address questions related to the concept of “*data*”—what data are and how data can be generated or acquired. Concepts such as identity, ethics, meaning, intersubjectivity, validity, and so on become further thematized in Cluster 2 in the context of understanding data (see Chapters 8–11).

FIGURE 1.3 Cluster Overview

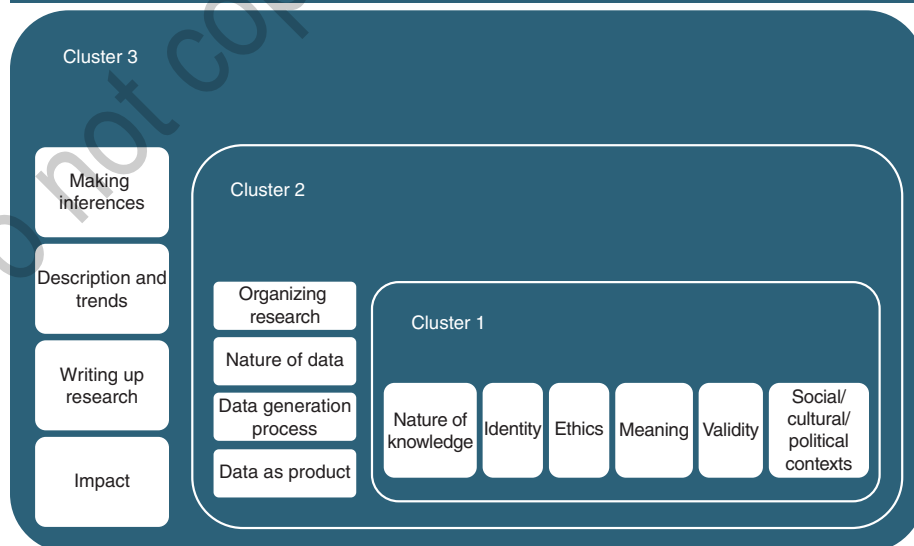
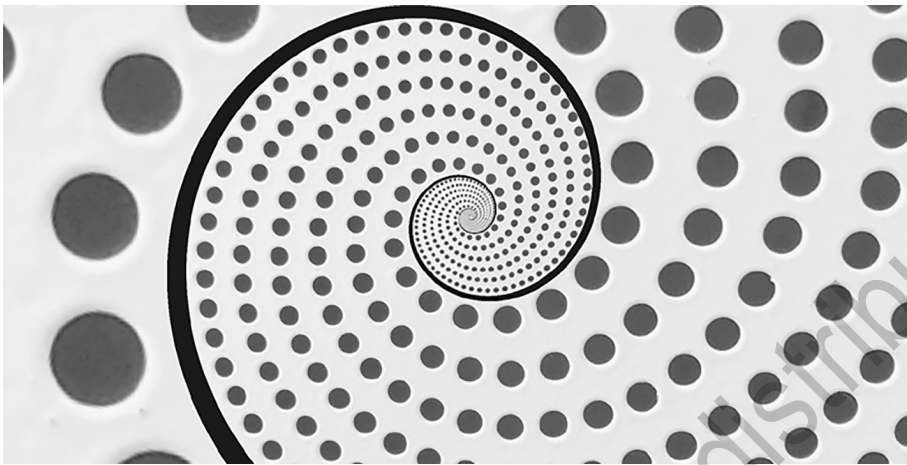


FIGURE 1.4 ● The Idea of Thematization

Source: iStock.com/JianGang Wang.

In Cluster 3 we focus on the concept of *making inferences* through research, and discuss various ways to make inferences, including lower-level or higher-level inferences across quantitative and qualitative research contexts. A demarcation between description and large trends and patterns of experiences is also relevant in understanding inferences. Throughout Clusters 2 and 3, key concepts introduced in Cluster 1 become increasingly thematized through more concrete contexts of research practice. Cluster 3 also expands the discussions on inference-making to the process of disseminating research findings and academic writing, and to the understanding of research impact.

Book Features

Structurewise, we contextualize our discussions in concrete research examples and bring in the voices and perspectives of other researchers/practitioners/students. We raise questions and provide space for critical thinking and deeper reflection in various features, while working to undermine our voices as unquestionable experts. Each chapter (except Chapter 1) is written following the same structure for consistency. After a short introduction, each chapter begins with a feature we call *Musing Upon the Everyday*. The feature usually presents an ordinary situation that you might experience as a student, a professional, or in everyday life, which we hope provides a bridge between your everyday experiences and research concepts. Following this section, we introduce a *Narrative* that highlights the main conceptual ideas in the chapter. Within this narrative we include *Conceptual Interludes* that highlight and explain conceptual ideas that the narrative sparks. This is followed by a *Research Scenario* that applies concepts discussed to one or more concrete research studies, written by different researchers from a variety of disciplines.

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Toward the end of each chapter, we add two features that provide opportunities for further reflection and applications. The You and Research section includes two subcategories—namely, When Interpreting Research, and When Doing Research. The When Interpreting Research subsection speaks to students who may continue to engage with research through reviewing and dissecting research findings for the purposes of, for example, guiding or evaluating professional practice. In contrast, the When Doing Research subsection is oriented to those students who are currently engaged in or may in the future engage in conducting an empirical research study. In both cases, we aim to provide practical knowledge and concrete applications for readers regarding the specific chapter content.

The Synthesis: Points for Reflection section, as the name suggests, serves to summarize the chapter, but it is more than just a summary of what has been discussed. Instead, in line with our dialogical approach, this section is an invitation for readers to continue the conversation in a few different ways. In the Conceptual Synthesis, we reflect back on key concepts discussed in the chapter, addressing how these discussions have built upon concepts introduced in previous chapters and engaged with them in integrated ways. We also recap key methodological ideas in the Methodological Synthesis, reflecting on how these link back to the conceptual discussion. We then create a space for Personal Synthesis, facilitating readers to draw your own connections to the chapter content as it relates to your personal and/or professional experiences. Finally, we end each chapter with a Moving Forward section that begins to make connections between concepts discussed and what will be introduced in the following chapter. We also provide a list of Further Readings, pertinent to key ideas discussed, and/or additional publications by the guest contributor(s).

Overall, chapters are written in a conversational style that aligns with the dialogic principle, which is at the core of this textbook. Our *language* (and content) *choices* also reflect a second key principle of our writing: inclusivity. To this end, we use the *pronouns* “they/them/theirs/themself” to move beyond gender-binary language. However, we do use “he/his” and “she/her/hers” in places where we are referencing individuals who we know identify as male or female, and in sections written by our guest contributors. We also include both first and last names of authors when we cite these authors for the first time in the text. This is to counter a historical erasure where women’s contributions to the academy and to the human intellectual history at large were significantly obscured.

In sum, we hope this prelude serves not only as a map to help you grasp the big picture of where we came from and where we are going, but also a Pandora’s box that gives a sneak peak of surprises and hopefully treasures for you to discover from new horizons. We are excited to have you on board!

Further Readings

Li, P., Ross, K., Zhao, P., & Dennis, B. (2017). Critical action research: How do graduate students in an introductory research class conceptualize “research”? In *SAGE Research Methods Cases, 2017*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Ross, K., Dennis, B., Zhao, P., & Li, P. (2017). Exploring graduate students' understanding of research: Links between identity, validity, and research conceptions. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*.

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