

# PRAGMATIC DECISIONS: CHOOSING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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Qualitative research is a way to produce knowledge about human experiences by exploring how participants engage with and interpret phenomena of interest. Here are four foundational concepts, five common qualitative methodologies, and a sample decision tree.

## Foundational Concepts

- Methodology is an approach to inquiry.
- Methods are specific types of data collection.
- Analysis techniques are specific approaches to analyzing data.
- Alignment is when the study's purpose, questions, data, analysis, and findings fit the assumptions of qualitative research and match the features of the selected methodology.

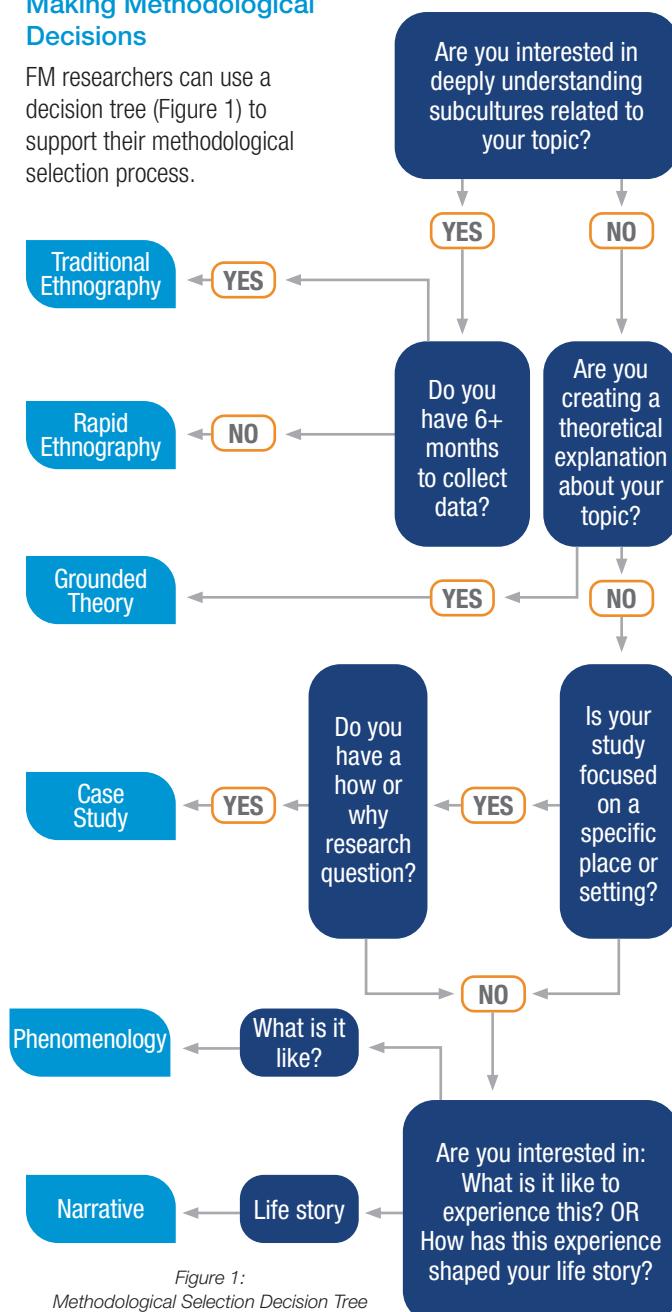
## Qualitative Methodologies

1. **Ethnography**<sup>1</sup> seeks to holistically understand cultures or communities. An exemplar research question is "What is the culture of an international medical graduate-majority FM residency program?" Data sources include contextual observations and key-informant interviews.
2. **Grounded theory**<sup>2</sup> produces localized theoretical explanations based on context-specific data. An exemplar research question is "How does professional identity formation occur for FM residents?"
3. **Case study**<sup>3</sup> occurs within a specific location, such as one family medicine (FM) department, addresses "how" or "why" research questions, and requires multiple kinds of data. Multisite case studies are also possible. An exemplar research question is "How do faculty at a predominantly White FM residency program mentor underrepresented minority residents?" Data sources include documents, interviews, and observations.
4. **Phenomenology**<sup>4</sup> explores lived experiences of interest (phenomena) from multiple or specific perspectives. This approach can uncover meanings within overlooked, mundane moments. An exemplar research question is "What are the promotion and tenure experiences of FM faculty who are parents of young children?"
5. **Narrative inquiry**<sup>5</sup> focuses on understanding participants' stories of an experience. This approach is rooted in oral traditions (eg, Indigenous storytelling, Black slave spirituals); the power of story is widely applicable and can be used to center the perspectives of marginalized populations. An exemplar research question is "What are the stories of transgender FM residents providing gender-affirming care?" Analysis concentrates on setting, action, time, and meanings found within individuals' accounts.

**DISCLAIMER:** The views expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of War, the Henry M. Jackson Foundation for the Advancement of Military Medicine, Inc., or the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.

## Making Methodological Decisions

FM researchers can use a decision tree (Figure 1) to support their methodological selection process.



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