



What Is Heuristic Inquiry, Anyway?

*What in your life is calling you,
When all the noise is silenced,
The meetings adjourned,
The lists laid aside,
And the wild iris blooms
By itself
In the dark forest . . .
What still pulls on your soul?*

~ Jalaluddin Rumi

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do I research human experience?
2. What is my role as a heuristic researcher?
3. What tools can heuristic inquiry offer me and my research needs?

At first glance, the words of Rumi appear as a question. Yet as we dwell with the essence of the words, we find, held within them, both an inquiry and a most tantalizing invitation to self-reflection, self-discovery, and self-transformation. Such is the domain of heuristic inquiry, which summons us to linger in silence and solitude, even as we are magnetized by the pull of life and the richness of the dark forest, and as we seek—both within and without—knowledge, meaning, and growth. Before we begin our journey of learning how to unravel the essential nature of human phenomena, however, it's crucial that we take a brief step back and connect with the origins of heuristic inquiry. We will then discuss the essential nature of this particular methodology, as well as its purpose, some of its defining characteristics, and some limitations and considerations to keep in mind when using this approach.

A Brief Recent History

Heuristic research started out more as an informal process of assessing and meaning-making than as a research approach. Clark Moustakas (1923–2012), the originator of heuristic inquiry, stated that the approach came to him as he searched for a proper word to meaningfully represent certain processes he felt were foundational to explorations of everyday human experience (1990). The methodology itself was introduced in a more formalized manner to the world of research methods with the publication of Moustakas's book *Loneliness* (1961), in which he depicted his experience of that phenomenon as he dwelled with a decision tied to his daughter's need for heart surgery. Moustakas used his personal knowledge of and relationship with loneliness as a foundation for exploring the phenomenon in others.

While this may seem like a biased or “non-empirical” way of engaging a research topic in some research traditions, we now have rejuvenated understandings of empiricism that, while they actually date back to the most primitive attempts to operationalize the exploration of human experience, are reemerging due to their relevance to the needs of contemporary research. We will delve into this topic in greater detail in Chapter 3, but for now, we can say that much of formalized research includes a deeply felt conscious or unconscious personal interest in a particular topic the researcher has experienced in one or more contexts, and a communion between what the researcher already knows about the topic and what he is out to learn or discover about it from others who have also experienced it. As American philosopher David Abram (1996) reminds us, “The scientist does not randomly choose a specific discipline or specialty, but is drawn to a particular field by a complex of subjective experiences and encounters, many of which unfold far from the laboratory and its rarefied atmosphere” (p. 33). Research is, thus, regardless of its paradigm or orientation, a multicultural, contextual, intersubjective, and embodied act.

If we give it some thought, we may see that we are all engaging in various heuristic practices even if we do not formally name what we are doing *heuristic*

inquiry. We are immersed in heuristic processes beginning with our very first efforts to learn—our preverbal experiences as infants—and continuing until the present moment of our lives. We are ceaselessly assessing what and how we sense, feel, and think about certain phenomena, while checking in with others to learn if they are experiencing them in different, similar, or the same ways, and then returning to ourselves to process all this information toward a more cohesive understanding. Heuristic inquiry acknowledges these experiences and includes them in the research process, making for a very personal and communal journey of discovery that

- includes a systematic though flexible research framework;
- engages self-searching and reflexive self-dialoguing;
- honors felt sense (Gendlin, 1981, 1996);
- stresses relationality, intersubjectivity, and “betweenness” (Buber, 1923/1970); and
- fosters integration.

In that sense, heuristic research is both art and science.

The term *heuristic* comes from the ancient Greek word *heuriskein*, “meaning to discover or to find” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9). Moustakas described **heuristic inquiry*** as a qualitative, social constructivist, and phenomenologically aligned research model (1990, 1994). In the context of social science and educational research, heuristic inquiry has also been identified as an autobiographical approach to qualitative research (Moustakas, 1990). Other descriptors and characterizations of heuristic inquiry that are not highly elaborated in the professional literature include the following:

- Exploratory, serendipitous, and discovery-oriented
- Process- and content-focused
- Intuitive, introspective, and reflexive
- Experiential, embodied, and holistic
- Existential and humanistic
- Culturally embedded and emancipatory
- Relational, authentic, and participatory
- Imaginative and creative
- Nonlinear, fluid, and flexible

*The definitions of bold terms can be found in the Glossary at the end of this volume.

Finally, a novel characteristic of heuristic inquiry that emerged from my dissertation research process is that it is the study of **living experience** (i.e., interrelated, interconnected, continuing experience) rather than the study of **lived experience**, which describes all phenomenological approaches and implies that human experiences are intermittent events that are disconnected from one another and that, once they are completed, are history (Sultan, 2015). Please see Table 1.1 for brief descriptions of the general characteristics and leanings of heuristic inquiry, all of which will be more fully explored throughout the text.

As a method for investigating and exploring human living experience, heuristic inquiry was inspired by a number of theories and knowledge bases, including those advanced by Abraham Maslow (1956, 1966, 1971), Martin Buber (1923/1970), and Edmund Husserl (1900/2001). It was especially influenced by Michael Polanyi (1958, 1966, 1969), whose writings stress tacit knowledge as the basis for all other forms of knowledge; Carl Rogers (1961, 1980, 1985), whose theories and approaches greatly inspired and informed the fields of psychotherapy and humanistic psychology due to their intensely relational and awareness-oriented dimensions; and Eugene Gendlin (1962), whose focusing body psychotherapy modality stresses the inner felt sense experience that is a significant component of heuristic research. In this newly revised approach to heuristic inquiry, the work of Martin Buber is brought into deeper focus as his explorations into the necessity of an I–Thou (versus an I–It) intersubjective approach to human relationships informs this volume’s enhanced emphasis on the pivotal role of the relationship between researcher and research partners. The phenomenology of perception elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/2013) also links quite seamlessly with this heuristic approach through its emphasis on human interaction and meaning-making as temporal, embodied, and perceptual acts.

These historical figures and theories made a prominent contribution to the knowledge base of how we are in the world and how we understand both our individual and shared experiences through embodiment, perception, self-exploration, self-knowledge, and self-actualization. Hence, the self of the researcher and the researcher’s perceptual field are key dynamics in the heuristic approach. “In its purest form, heuristics is a passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 39). So what might distinguish heuristic inquiry from, say, autoethnography? Well, in autoethnography the search for understanding the essence of a topic of inquiry through the self is focused on *one* self—that of the primary researcher. In a heuristic study, however, self-research is but one dimension of the study. Focus on individual experience is a Eurocentric lens on research and may not address advancement and movement from the personal toward the universal. Thus, heuristic researchers explore their own internal pathways, as well as those of the selves of others, as we radiate from the personal domain of experiencing a phenomenon into the realm of the

TABLE 1.1 • General Characteristics and Leanings of Heuristic Inquiry

Qualitative	Exploratory and emergent. Questions focus on the <i>what</i> and <i>how</i> of the topic of inquiry (Creswell, 2009; Finlay, 2011; Krathwohl, 2009). Takes into account and is influenced by the experiences and perceptions of the researcher (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2015), who is considered the key instrument of data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Porter, 2010).
Social constructivist	Assumes reality is relative and is constructed based on one's contextual and subjective meaning-making of personal experience (Ponterotto, 2005). Adopts a first-person, personalized approach to presenting the findings, acknowledging the researcher's biases, values, and attitudes, and the impact of these on the research. Relies on research partners' views of the topic of inquiry.
Phenomenologically aligned	Attempts to make sense of experience as it is perceived (Krathwohl, 2009) to allow for the illumination of deep understandings and meanings (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). Views perception as the primary source of knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013) informing the constituents of one's lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003). Invites researchers to slow down, focus on the topic of inquiry, immerse themselves in it, and dwell with it while engaging empathy, acceptance, and creativity (Creswell, 2013; Finlay, 2011; Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2015; Wertz, 2005).
Autobiographical	Originates within the self. Includes personal history, memory, imagination, and perception, fusing past, present, and future (Moustakas, 1994; Sultan, 2015) into the here and now.
Exploratory, serendipitous, and discovery-oriented	Embraces an attitude of wonder (Wertz, 2005), openness, and curiosity (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2015) toward purposive and systematic inquiry that is marked by spontaneity and either prearranged or accidental discovery (Stebbins, 2008) or emergence.
Process- and content-focused	Emphasizes the process of inquiry and its dynamics, versus a predetermined outcome. Keeps researchers close to the data that are emerging (Creswell, 2013; Krathwohl, 2009). Honors all elaborations of process and content, including dialogue and discourse, and various types of artifacts, such as writing samples, journal entries, poetry, artwork, musical compositions, photos, and symbols.

(Continued)

TABLE 1.1 ● (Continued)

Intuitive, introspective, and reflexive	Honors and acknowledges <i>tacit knowing</i> —that is, implicit knowledge or understanding (Polanyi, 1958, 1966, 1969). Informed by the process of focusing on one's <i>felt sense</i> —the rightness of feeling in one's gut (Gendlin, 1981, 1996)—which allows words, phrases, images, memories, symbols, or novel understandings representing a topic to come to the surface. Supported by the researcher's ability to reflectively and reflexively attend to both her own and her research partners' experience (Moustakas, 1990, 2015), and the interweaving of both experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013), to attain deeper levels of awareness.
Experiential, embodied, and holistic	Views subjective human experience—the here-and-now relationship between one's body and oneself and one's body and the world—reciprocity, and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013) as pivotal to informing the research process. Focuses on multiple facets of human experience: cognitive, emotional, sensory∞kinesthetic, perceptual, spiritual, social∞relational, and their integration (Sultan, 2015). Honors both verbal and nonverbal experience. Operates at the intersection of <i>being</i> and <i>knowing</i> .
Existential and humanistic	Underlines human perception—that is, how individuals <i>know</i> their world (Johnson, 2008)—as well as human limitations and aspirations. Emphasizes one's tendency toward meaning-making, authenticity, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1968, 1976; Rogers, 1961). Characterized by subjectivity (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985), personal involvement, and full engagement with the topic of inquiry (Rogers, 1961).
Culturally embedded and emancipatory	Includes consideration of the social context and issues related to diversity, such as gender, age, ethnicity, religion, social class, ability, and sexuality, toward social justice (Miller, 2008a). Enhances one's ability to reconstitute one's understanding of reality in a manner that embraces new perceptions and does not conflict with personal views (McGettigan, 2008a), with wide implications for social change.
Relational, authentic, and participatory	Informed by the dynamic flow of presence, self- and other-awareness, empathy (Rogers, 1961), and intersubjectivity (Buber, 1923/1970) through which researcher and co-researchers experience the confluences of betweenness and witness in their shared encounter (Sultan, 2015). Used to enhance trust and deeper exploration.

	May transform the researcher (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985) and co-researchers by providing opportunities for intense personal contact, joint self-disclosure, and creation and meaning-making of shared subjective experience (Finlay, 2011). Inclusive, equitable, empowering, awareness-enhancing, and action-oriented (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).
Imaginative and creative	Refers to the emergence of novelty at the intersection of a person's uniqueness with people, events, and circumstances in life (Rogers, 1961). Marked by the ability to experience "the fresh, the raw, the concrete, the idiographic, as well as the generic, the abstract, the rubricized, the categorized, and the classified" (Maslow, 1976, p. 88). Stresses freedom, spontaneity, self-acceptance, and integration. Demonstrates nontraditional approaches to data collection, organization, and analysis. Allows for nonliteral representations of perceived reality (Patton, 2008).
Nonlinear, fluid, and flexible	Informed by openness to and awareness of multiple experiences at once (Rogers, 1961), versus experiencing and perceiving in predetermined ways. Characterized by tolerance for ambiguity and the unknown, and nonattachment to specified outcomes—that is, willingness "to conduct one's research on behalf of the phenomenon" (Dahlberg, Dahlberg, & Nyström, 2008, p. 98). Adaptable to meet the needs of researchers within diverse disciplines working with phenomena that are vague or difficult to observe, measure, or document.
Living versus lived	Acknowledges all human experience as interconnected and interrelated, and thus as one continuing, enduring cycle rather than a series of discrete, disconnected historical events. Views research as the exploration of present-moment, ongoing, <i>living</i> human experience, even when exploring past experiences. Resonates with the rich, textured descriptions and voices of those who have experienced the topic of inquiry.

universal. With that, while such internal pathways may not always be clearly outlined, there is the inevitable moment of knowing one has arrived at the center of the labyrinth one is journeying and has attained illumination, only to begin a newly inspired heuristic journey. Figure 1.1 is a photo of a naturally etched environmental expression of the labyrinth. Figure 1.2 is a photo of the entrance of the walking labyrinth (a replica of the labyrinth of the Chartres Cathedral) located on the grounds of the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, where I work.

FIGURE 1.1 ● A Knot in a Plank of Wood: A Labyrinth Carved by Nature, Upon Nature

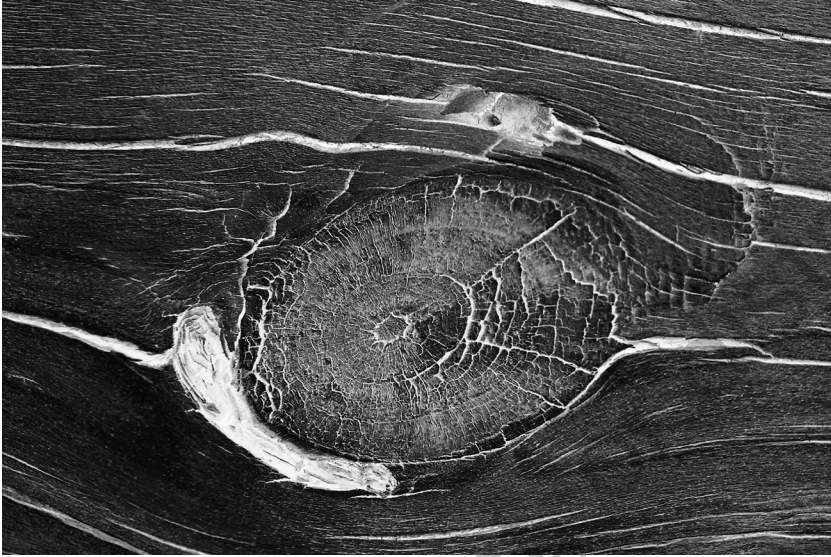


FIGURE 1.2 ● The Entrance of the Labyrinth at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas: A Replica of the Labyrinth at the Chartres Cathedral



The Purpose of Heuristic Inquiry

Heuristic inquiry involves exploring the subjective experience of a particular phenomenon within a purposive sample of individuals. Heuristic researchers do not separate the individual from the experience but rather focus their exploration on the essential nature of the relationship or interaction between both. The central question asked by any heuristic research study is: *What is the experience of . . . ?* A secondary question of focus in a heuristic study may be: *How do I/you experience this phenomenon?* As evident, both questions are open-ended, inviting further discourse and elaboration rather than confining co-researchers to specific, predetermined responses. As an example, the central topic of inquiry in the heuristic study I conducted for my dissertation (Sultan, 2015) was the experience of embodiment in psychotherapists. The core questions I asked of my research partners, all of whom were body-centered psychotherapists with a personal experience of embodiment, were as follows:

1. What does it mean for you to be embodied?
2. How do you use your embodiment within the therapeutic process?
3. Can you share some clinical examples of how you use your embodiment in the therapeutic encounter?
4. What is your perception of the impact of your embodiment on the clients you work with?

Such questions demonstrate the central premise of heuristic inquiry—self- and other-exploration toward shared understanding of the essential nature of the core phenomenon, how it is sensed and experienced, and its significance to oneself, to others, and to the world.

You might be thinking, *I can ask these very same questions within a grounded theory study. So why heuristic inquiry and not grounded theory?* My simple response is that while we may ask the same or similar questions in studies conducted across various qualitative methodologies, the findings will vary (more on this in Chapter 2). For example, in a grounded theory study, the idea is to identify a theoretical understanding of a phenomenon through a group of themes that assimilate around a core theme, whereas in a heuristic study, the idea is to identify nonhierarchical themes that help us understand the essential nature of the phenomenon. Additionally, grounded theory and heuristic inquiry each follow their own unique process of inquiry that both informs and is informed by the research question(s). Finally, due to heuristic inquiry's humanistic background, it embraces a unique focus on holism and personhood—essentially, on what it means to be human.

Please see Box 1.1, which lists a number of heuristic inquiry research studies demonstrating the applicability of this singular research method across multiple disciplines. Some of these studies will be explored in greater depth in

BOX 1.1**EXAMPLES OF HEURISTIC RESEARCH STUDIES**

Alsobrook, R. F. (2015). *Yoga and emotional well-being: A heuristic inquiry into the experience of women with a yoga practice*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harold Abel School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Capella University.

Green, C. (2012). *The wild writer: A heuristic inquiry into the ecological writer's experience of nature*. Unpublished master's thesis, Prescott College, Prescott, AZ.

Holt-Waldo, N. Y. (2011). *The lived experience of being a holistic nurse educator: A heuristic inquiry*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Capella University.

Leiby, J. C. (2014). *Windows to the soul: A heuristic inquiry in the use of the eyes as portals to innate presence*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Sofia University, Palo Alto, CA.

Madden, E. M. (2015). *The lived experience of being spiritual for an atheist*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harold Abel School of Social and Behavioral Science, Capella University.

Moustakas, C. E. (1961). *Loneliness*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Pogge, S. M. (2013). *The experience of living with chronic illness: A heuristic study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Psychology and Philosophy, College of Arts and Sciences, Texas Woman's University, Denton, TX.

Sultan, N. (2015). *A heuristic inquiry of the embodied experiences of body psychotherapists in the therapeutic encounter*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Counseling and Human Services, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, TX.

Whatley, R. J. (2015). *Pulling the arrows out of our hearts: An heuristic inquiry into the lived experience of internalized racism of African American women*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, CA.

later chapters. In the meantime, I recommend looking up some of these studies and exploring the unique features that emerge through use of the heuristic methodology.

Essential Features

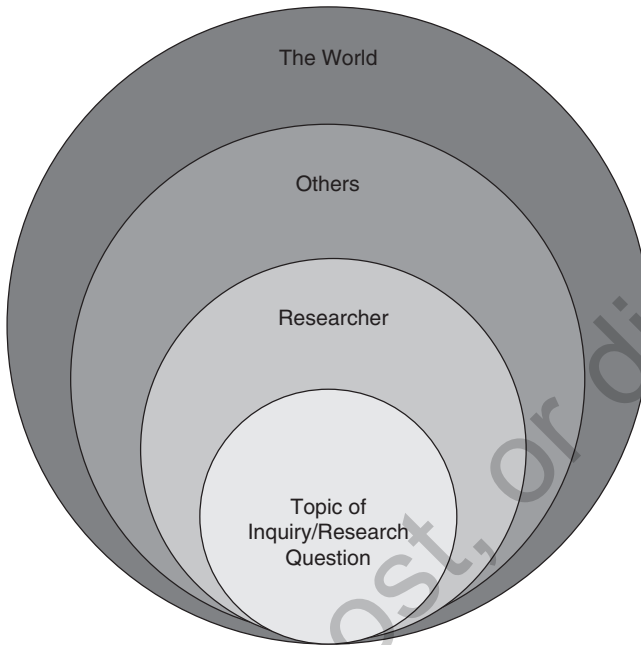
Apart from any altruistic or professional motives, heuristic studies are grounded in our personal experience and embedded within our personhood. Heuristic inquiry emerges from the researcher's **initial engagement**, or first encounter,

with a topic of extreme interest through an autobiographical experience that, though it is internal and personal to you (the researcher), is potentially of social and universal significance. The experience is so deeply felt that it arouses one central question you are unable to ignore. In a manner of speaking, the general topic of inquiry chooses you, which is quite a departure from many traditional approaches to research whereby you go about a rather methodical selection and “pruning” of the research topic. This deeply felt phenomenon or experience becomes a point of encounter between your internal world and the external world in which the phenomenon is playing out and in which the research is taking place. In a way, the research question and the process of exploring it become a calling, a sort of invitation to enter the labyrinth and embrace the journey.

What does this mean for you? Once the question is found, your urge to find an answer must be set aside so you can embody and live the question fully. While it requires some degree of patience and engagement with the actual research process, this practice of **immersion** allows for the ambiguity that is a central aspect of the heuristic approach while releasing any attachment to a specified goal, finding, or outcome. It also lays the foundation for the central question or topic of inquiry to embody you and thereby inform the process of inquiry and discovery. Thus, we heuristic researchers adopt the attitude of *learner* versus *expert* as we connect fully with the phenomenon being explored. We bring passion, curiosity, imagination, and vulnerability as we allow ourselves to be drawn into the rich banquet of the unknown, even while living it in all dimensions of our experience: in sleeping, in waking, in going about our day, in our interactions with others, in our dialogue with ourselves, and in any other encounters we may have. We open up our senses, our intuition, our thoughts, our feelings, and our awareness in our search for the qualities, conditions, and relationships that motivate our research question (Moustakas, 1990). We experience our entire way of being in the world—and are connected to ourselves, to others, and to the world—through the lens of our topic of inquiry. As Moustakas (1990, 2015) described it, the research question becomes a “lingering presence” (Moustakas, 2015, p. 309) as the researcher interacts with and encounters or cocreates new knowledge. See Figure 1.3 for a visual representation of this.

As you connect with varying dimensions of your experience (including interest, curiosity, openness, fascination, reflection, and various versions of the research question) and acquire novel information, you may need to step away every once in a while to allow this knowledge to incubate. **Incubation** is a process of care, cultivation, and growth that enhances and encourages insight, understanding, and integration. Paradoxically, then, to fully connect with this tacit, implicit dimension and what it holds about the topic of inquiry, you must be willing to sometimes surrender your intimate relationship with the topic of inquiry and your attachment to rigid time schedules. As Moustakas (2015) notes, “The heuristic process is rooted in experiential time, not clock time” (p. 318). Again, this calls for your willingness to be flexible with regard to a specific timeline or outcome (more on how to do this realistically in Chapter 6) as you allow yourself to move back and forth between intimacy with and distance from the research question.

FIGURE 1.3 ● Topic of Inquiry/Research Question as a Lens for Being, Relating, and Knowing



This can be quite scary and confusing, evoking a significant amount of fear and anxiety as you come face-to-face with uncertainty. On the other hand, if you are willing to truly surrender to the research process, there is the enormous and ever fascinating reward of being with whatever emerges serendipitously, as unexpected as it may be. In that respect, this process involves a high level of innate artistry in which you, the primary researcher, balance engagement and detachment, proximity and distance, tension and release, while remaining cautious not to become stuck on either end of these spectra. Throughout the course of the study, you go back and forth in a rhythmic dance between the processes of immersion and incubation, within and between a variety of contexts that nurture the knowledge that is about to emerge. In essence, you surrender to the labyrinth, with all its twists and turns, knowing that there is no right or wrong way to pursue that path. This flexibility of movement is guided by your internal subjective experience and in turn guides the research endeavor and the organic emergence of new knowledge throughout various phases of the inquiry, with the deeply felt question itself holding the capacity to inspire discovery, profound understanding, and transformation within all who come into contact with it.

The heuristic approach emphasizes the unraveling of the essential nature and meaning of a unique phenomenon through engagement in a number of

internal processes in nonsequential fashion, including self-exploration and self-reflection toward **illumination**—that is, awareness, discovery, and deeper knowledge and understanding (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Sultan, 2015). It thus encourages the researcher's continued immersion and focused attention, and may evoke "the opening of wounds and passionate concerns" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 14) as you pursue a creative, existential journey that, while it originates within the self, has the potential for both personal and communal transformation.

Along similar lines, the heuristic approach demands engagement in external processes that involve dialoguing, interacting, and collaborating with others who have shared comparable or similar experiences toward jointly constructing new understandings of those experiences. This creative and relational process supports a healthy blending of boundaries and the formation of confluent spaces in which may emerge and linger exchanges with universal themes. Some qualitative methodologies stress the importance of story in this data collection phase. However, story implies the necessity of a beginning, a middle, and an end. In heuristic inquiry, although the organization of experience into a cohesive whole is critical, we researchers tend to relax expectations about arriving at a particular truth or destination. Heuristic researchers are involved in an ongoing, nonlinear process of questioning, seeking, waiting, incubating, and receiving. When a moment of encounter occurs, the researcher is inspired with more curiosity, wonder, and questions, and the process resumes. Hence, the focus in heuristic inquiry is on relational, intersubjective, empathic discourse—both verbal and nonverbal, both personal and shared. This underscores ongoing communication and conversation, even past the publication of the manuscript, as readers from diverse backgrounds interact with the findings and engage in their own heuristic process.

Underlying all this are the individual and collective beliefs, values, and assumptions of the researcher, co-researchers, and readers of the findings, which are linked by cultural norms and practices, language, and other social structures. By this token, discovery is not created only through a structured, goal-oriented objective stance, but through the scintillating hope of empathic relationships that enable new knowledge to emerge uninhibited and uncensored, or even serendipitously. In this respect, heuristic inquiry fosters the possibility of community and communion and, through those constructs (paradoxically), the validation of personal experience and identity. Heuristic inquiry thus involves working with various dimensions of the psyche such as sensing, perceiving, imagining, remembering, intuiting, feeling, thinking, and judging (Churchill, 2005) within the here and now while highlighting unique personal experiences with universal significance.

All this being said, it is important to note that in heuristic inquiry, transformation happens because the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and thus has direct access to and intimate involvement with whatever is emerging throughout the course of the study. This includes not only the content of the data collected but the process of collecting the data, collaborating and interacting relationally with co-researchers, reorganizing previously held

knowledge, and cocreating new meanings and representations. This means of engaging the process of inquiry shields the research process from becoming an automated and disembodied exercise of collecting information. It also involves openness and receptivity to data gathered through your own senses, and consideration of and responsiveness to verbal as well as nonverbal experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In fact, what Polanyi (1958, 1966, 1969) refers to as **tacit knowing**—that is, implicit knowing, or knowing that lies beyond what may be readily observed or articulated—is a highly valued concept of the heuristic approach (more on tacit knowing in Chapter 4). Consequently, heuristic inquiry is a nonreductionist, holistic research approach that concerns itself more with meanings than with measurements, with essence than with appearance, with quality than with quantity, and with experience than with behavior (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Please see Box 1.2 for a summative description of the heuristic approach in Moustakas's (1990) own words.

Figure 1.4 illustrates the interplay of some of the many processes that go into heuristic research.

Box 1.2

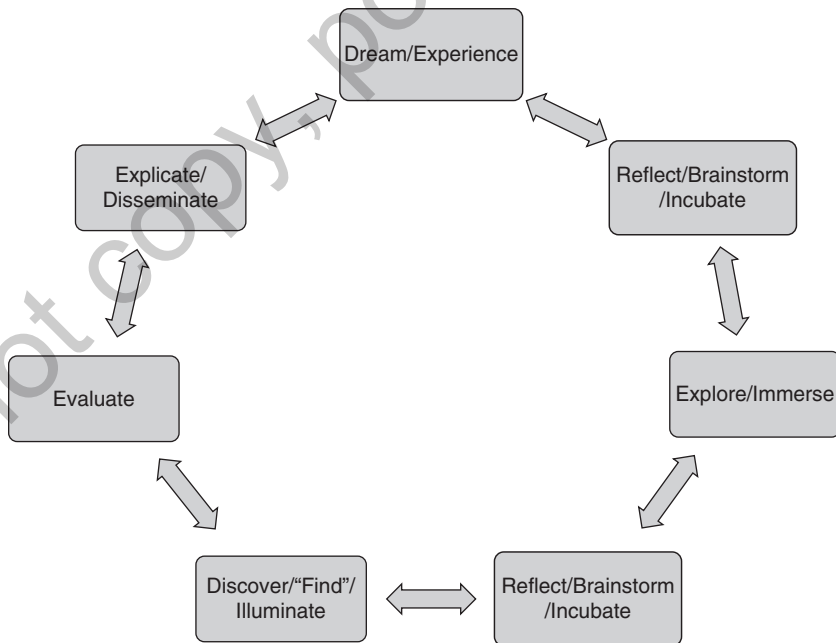
A SUMMATIVE DESCRIPTION OF THE HEURISTIC APPROACH IN MOUSTAKAS'S (1990) WORDS

- “A process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience and develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. The self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge” (p. 9).
- “The heuristic process is a way of being informed, a way of knowing. Whatever presents itself in the consciousness of the investigator as perception, sense, intuition, or knowledge represents an invitation for further elucidation. What appears, what shows itself as itself, casts a light that enables one to come to know more fully what something is and means. In such a process not only is knowledge extended but the self of the researcher is illuminated” (pp. 10–11).
- “From the beginning and throughout an investigation, heuristic research involves self-search, self-dialogue, and self-discovery; the research question and methodology flow out of inner awareness, meaning, and inspiration” (p. 11).
- “I begin the heuristic investigation with my own self-awareness and explicate that awareness with reference to a question or problem until an essential insight is achieved, one that will throw a beginning light onto a critical human experience” (p. 11).
- “In heuristic investigations, I may be entranced by visions, images, and dreams that connect me to my quest. I may come into touch

with new regions of myself, and discover revealing connections with others. Through the guides of a heuristic design, I am able to see and understand in a different way” (p. 11).

- “In heuristics, an unshakable connection exists between what is out there, in its appearance and reality, and what is within me in reflective thought, feeling, and awareness” (p. 12).
- “I begin the heuristic journey with something that has called to me from within my life experience, something to which I have associations and fleeting awarenesses but whose nature is largely unknown. In such an odyssey, I know little of the territory through which I must travel. But one thing is certain, the mystery summons me and lures me to let go of the known and swim in an unknown current” (p. 13).
- “Heuristics is a way of engaging in scientific search through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences. . . . This requires a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered” (p. 15).

FIGURE 1.4 • The Heuristic Research Process



I also invite you to try out Exercise 1.1, which allows you to sense into and express your current understanding of heuristic inquiry.

EXERCISE 1.1

SENSING INTO AND EXPRESSING A ROUGH UNDERSTANDING OF HEURISTIC INQUIRY

- Find a composition notebook or sketchpad to use as a journal as you read this book; journaling is a key practice embedded within the heuristic approach.
- Take a deep, conscious breath. Exhale slowly and fully. Repeat this. Take your time.
- Find your center of gravity and connect with it. Take another deep, conscious breath.
- Without looking back at Chapter 1 or ahead to any of the other chapters, and without setting a time limit to your process, write as many words, phrases, or concepts, as you can generate that are associated with heuristic inquiry.
- Also note or draw any symbols or doodles that come into your awareness.
- Write and draw without censoring your thoughts, feelings, or body sensations. Allow these experiences in your process. Do this until you feel you have exhausted your source.
- Look at all the words and phrases on your page. Read them aloud while attending consciously to the experience of speaking the words and hearing your voice. What do you experience as you articulate those words?
- Look at the symbols and doodles. What is it like to see them? Using the tips of your fingers, trace each symbol. What do you experience as you do this?
- Bring your awareness to any thoughts, emotions, or body sensations that emerge. Make note of each of your experiences—again, without censoring or judging.
- Are you able to bring an attitude of curiosity, openness, and nonjudgment to your experiences?

Example of thoughts: I wonder where that doodle came from; what does it mean?

Examples of feelings: sadness, anger, joy

Examples of body sensations: tight chest, trembling hands

Processes and Phases

Moustakas (1990) outlined seven concepts and processes involved in the researcher's journey of arriving at a deeper understanding of the central question through heuristic inquiry:

- Identifying with the focus of inquiry
- Self-dialogue
- Tacit knowing
- Intuition
- Indwelling
- Focusing
- Internal frame of reference

In addition to these processes, there are six phases of heuristic inquiry that are curiously similar to Graham Wallas's (1976) stages of the creative process:

- Initial engagement
- Immersion
- Incubation
- Illumination
- Explication
- Creative synthesis

These processes and phases will be described in greater detail in Chapter 4.

As is evident from the processes and phases engaged in this unique research approach, heuristic inquiry encourages the reduction of deliberate, forced effort designed to arrive at absolute truths. It instead highlights the importance of taking a holistic and creative approach to the process of inquiry and engaging in it with genuine curiosity, openness, tolerance for ambiguity and the unknown, patience, and non-attachment to specified outcomes. This supports a fluid and flexible form and structure in all dimensions and stages of a research study that is consequently highly process- and content-oriented and that supports dialogical interaction between preexisting knowledge of the topic of inquiry and new information emerging from connecting with research partners and content on a profoundly relational and experiential level.

Because the phenomenon being explored in a heuristic inquiry emerges from the autobiographical and often intensely personal experience of the primary researcher, during the evolution of the heuristic inquiry phases and

throughout the course of the study, it is your ethical responsibility to reflect on and process your experience through reflexive and reflective exercises such as journaling, artwork, meditation, role-playing, body movement, and poetry, or through consultation with peers and/or supervisors (more on this in Chapter 10). Many qualitative approaches discuss the concept of reflexive **bracketing** of the researcher's experience throughout the course of a study. Bracketing of personal experience is highly regarded in qualitative research circles, as it helps researchers critically assess, recognize, and suspend or set aside some of their personal motives and values, with the objective being to minimize the imposition of such values on the research process. This is critical, as bringing our assumptions or preexisting theories into any process of inquiry may compromise it as we attempt to confirm what we already *know* to satisfy a particular hypothesis or the need to be right. Entering into a research endeavor with a preestablished idea about the findings is an egotistic trap in which we may get caught as we attempt to protect the false edifice of our knowledge. As Tulku (1987) stated, "The *attitudes* we adopt in carrying out our investigation shape the *attributes* we find in the world we investigate" (p. 307).

While heuristic inquiry appreciates the significance and noble rationale behind bracketing, it also underscores that bracketing should not result in elimination of researcher values, with the understanding that the elimination of value biases is a fallacy (Ponterotto, 2005), especially in such a personally motivated research endeavor as that undertaken through a heuristic process. Additionally, given that heuristic inquiry is inspired, in the first place, by an autobiographical experience, it seems unrealistic to even pretend engaging in the elimination of personal values. Essentially, you experience what you perceive to be an extraordinary and captivating phenomenon and seek to create what meaning you can of it through both internal and external discourse. Heuristic inquiry enables you to do this.

Heuristic research values your personal interest and stresses the importance of the topic of inquiry being internally located versus attempting to satisfy the traditional requirements of empiricism by identifying the researcher as an unbiased, unconcerned observer. In fact, trying to embrace the role of a distant and detached bystander in heuristic research may create opportunities for you to dabble in your bias within the safety of your professed detachment. To what end? Thus, in heuristic inquiry, the purpose of bracketing and reflexivity is not to abstract the researcher from the research but instead to enhance researcher awareness as to *how* to approach the research question and process of inquiry. The idea is to allow researchers to honor and take ownership of their personal experience, to invite researchers to challenge and explore what they think they know, to extend transparency and minimize deception, and to enhance the trustworthiness of the research. In essence, as a heuristic researcher, I do not bracket myself *out of* my research studies. Instead, I bracket myself *into* the process of inquiry. As I *out* my personal interests, motivations, and agenda, I *in* myself within the study. Along those lines, I am able to bring my authentic embodied self into the research process to

be present with the authentic embodied selves of the co-researchers as both process and outcome are co-constructed. New knowledge is jointly created as a shared embodied experience between me and my co-researchers. Thus, as the primary researcher, I pay particular attention to the dynamics of privileging one perspective over others and to potentially losing sight of the fact that each contribution is of worth as a bearer of knowledge and a living experience.

The rigor of the heuristic approach is generated through observation of and dialoguing with self and others, especially through in-depth interviewing (Moustakas, 1990, 2015), usually of a **purposive sample**—that is, one that targets a particular group of people based on their experience of the phenomenon being explored. In addition to interviewing, heuristic inquiry invites the inclusion of artifacts such as journal entries, artwork, musical compositions, photos, and other forms of creative expression, from both the researcher and research partners. Through openness to the experience itself and to new ways of viewing it, **indwelling** (turning inward) and intuition, shared intensity of the experience with co-researchers, and shared inquiry and reflection with co-researchers, the researcher arrives at insight into the central phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002). This creates a sense of connectedness as researcher and research partners collaborate to illuminate the nature and essence of the topic of inquiry (Patton, 2002).

Limitations of Heuristic Inquiry

Like all other research approaches, heuristic inquiry has its strengths and its limitations. The many strengths and unique characteristics of heuristic inquiry have been outlined both implicitly and explicitly, thus far, and will be highlighted throughout this text. However, in the interest of fostering ethical and rigorous qualitative research, it is also important to note some of the limitations of heuristic inquiry and to address some ways to mitigate potential negative impacts on the research process. As a holistic researcher and person, I view the fact that heuristic inquiry has limitations as a sign of its intrinsic health. I also view the limitations not as a deterrent to successful research but as an instrument the researcher, co-researchers, and readers of the findings may use to enhance their creative interaction with the information they are processing. Working creatively and intuitively with challenges may, in and of itself, yield powerful and transformative experiences. So then . . . limitations:

- *Heuristic research is not for objective folks, nor is it for those who are not creative.* First of all, we are all creative beings. We all enjoy some spirit of imagination and love for the original. If you have ever daydreamed, you are creative. If you have tried your hand at another resolution to a problem that seemed to have only one way out, you are creative. If you have to survive, on a day-by-day basis, in this world, you are creative. You get the picture. As for the objectivity piece, heuristic inquiry invites both nearness and distance, both intimacy and detachment.

Remember, it's all about maintaining the flow of the dance between the seeming polarities of experience.

- *Researchers may experience roadblocks as they try to define or refine their research question.* This will happen! I am not saying it *may* happen but that it *will*. This is a natural consequence of your personal engagement, on an intense level, with the phenomenon being explored. As you attempt to understand your experience, questions saturate both your inner and outer landscapes, as well as everything in between. Once again, I remind you to open yourself up to the sheer deluge of stimuli and to allow yourself to become immersed in it while using your self-awareness to recognize when it is time to step away and let things incubate. I also would like to caution that we researchers know precisely what it is we want to explore. However, we may taint our desire with self-doubt, social conformity, and fear of failure. Embrace all of this, I say! Eventually, the true question that burns within you slow and blue will emerge into your awareness, fully and forcefully.
- *Researchers may, during the process of immersion in the data, feel lost and never attain illumination.* Heuristic researchers often feel lost. So do other quantitative and qualitative researchers as we travel our research journeys. You are both permitted and encouraged to feel lost while acknowledging that this sense of loss of direction is but an ornament that embellishes the research process and makes it richer. Feeling lost means that we must seek other ways to get back on track. In your search for your correct path, sometimes you will come upon hidden trails you never would have dreamed of finding otherwise.
- *The final findings or manuscript may not yield any new or definitive information.* True. However, how do we define what is definitive and what is not? Whether or not something is definitive is quite subjective, as is whether or not something is new. Additionally, your topic of inquiry will hardly ever be an anomaly. Someone has already asked the very questions you are asking, although perhaps within a different context. Thus, individuals who come into contact with the findings will go through their own exploratory process of how they experience the findings and what those findings mean for them, expanding the horizons of every heuristic study into the present-moment way of being of those who interact with it. This speaks to the living process and universal significance that characterize both heuristic inquiry and human experience.
- *Some researchers, research partners, or readers of the findings may feel more perplexed after their participation or reading experience than before it.* Absolutely. On the other hand, one of the finest qualities of heuristic inquiry is its invitation to open ourselves up to the confusion that may emerge as part of both the participation and the reading experience. Remember the last time you felt confused about something and, rather

than continuing to fight it until it drove you nuts, you decided to just let it go? What happened next? You remember. Remain dedicated to working your way through the labyrinth. Eventually, you will reach the center and work your way back out.

- *The heuristic research process may reveal more differences than similarities.* Agreed. Then again, heuristic inquiry celebrates difference. If it did not, heuristic researchers would direct their eyes only to their bellies and accept whatever “truths” emerged from that process as The Truth. In fact, more heuristic researchers than not like to include research partners in their studies. Take a look at the list of heuristic studies I have included in Box 1.1 and you will see what I mean. Honoring difference allows us to highlight similarity.
- *The research findings may not be easily generalizable due to the small number of research partners.* I’d like to remind you about finding the universal within the particular and vice versa. A parallel concept is finding the typical within the singular and vice versa. Finally, as a psychotherapist who is often exposed to vicariously shared experiences with my clients, I cannot help impressing on you that many dimensions of what you share with readers will resonate and arouse within them questions, thoughts, feelings, and sensations that will inspire them toward their own new directions and horizons. This, too, is part of the fluid nature of heuristic inquiry and human experience.
- *The research findings may not result in any social action or change.* This particular limitation evokes the question, *How do we define social action and change?* Many of us imagine advocacy and social action as conduct that both demands and produces decisive social transformation. On the other hand, solid and enduring change often requires time and happens in small chunks, while change that takes place rapidly may be short-lived. In that vein, if even one person is transformed in some small way by either participating in the research process or interacting with the findings, then the wheels of lasting change are in motion.

I can keep going on about the limitations of heuristic inquiry. But I think you probably see how my experiencing process works and how I embrace a good challenge. I invite you to engage a similar process with some of the challenges you will likely face as you carry out any type of research, be it qualitative or quantitative, heuristic or otherwise. Embrace your creative self and make sure that part of you stays anchored to you, around you, inside you—always!

Closing Reflections

Moustakas (1990, 2015) reminds us of the open-endedness of heuristic research, asserting that each research journey should be allowed to emerge in its own unique way. The flexibility of the heuristic approach makes it highly adaptable

and, thus, ideal for researching a diversity of topics across disciplines, and phenomena that are vague or difficult to observe, measure, or document. Going about heuristic research using a rigid step-by-step outline would fly in the face of its fluid and inventive nature and undermine its spontaneity. The beauty of the heuristic approach lies in its systematic but improvisational method of conducting scientific inquiry while incorporating the self of the researcher, thereby allowing us to explore our most meaningful and significant life experiences without succumbing to the inhibitions and structures imposed upon traditional empirical research methodologies. It invites any and all manifestations of the topic of inquiry: within the researcher; within individual co-researchers; in the shared experience between and among one, the other, and the world; in journal entries, artwork, poetry, or other forms of creative expression; in letters, photos, or other artifacts; in previously published findings; in the content of dreams or other altered states; and in verbal and nonverbal discourse. It welcomes questions that have been shunned, neglected, or avoided in research (and in society) and embraces populations that have been oppressed, discriminated against, or marginalized.

Through its existential and humanistic philosophical foundations, heuristic research views human experience as embodied and relational, and acknowledges the human potential for self-actualization. It thus creates a space for the magic that happens when researcher and co-researchers come together in shared curiosity and open ourselves up to becoming enchanted and transformed, not only by findings embedded in real-life experience but by the pull of the process itself on our souls. As we inch closer to the singular, living features of a person, place, or phenomenon, the universal—ever so tenderly—unfolds!