

Series Foreword

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

Indeed, the number and variety of qualitative approaches that have been developed are remarkable. The question for many of us, though, has been how to decide among the various approaches. Furthermore, many prior descriptions of the various qualitative methods have not provided clear explanations, making it difficult for novice researchers to learn how to use them. Thus, those interested in learning about and pursuing qualitative research need crisp and thorough descriptions of the steps of these approaches with lots of examples so readers can grasp how to use the methods.

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

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We asked the authors to provide the context for their method, which includes providing a rationale, situating their method within the qualitative tradition, describing the philosophical and epistemological background in terms that are easily understood, and noting the key features of the method. We then asked them to present the steps of their method in detail, including selecting a research team, sampling, biases and expectations, data collection, data analyses, and variations on their method. We also asked authors to provide tips for the research process and for writing manuscripts emerging from studies using the method. Finally, we asked authors to reflect on the methodological integrity of their approach, along with the benefits and limitations of their particular method, and to provide a list of exemplar studies so readers can get good illustrations of the approach.

The books in this series can be used in several ways. Instructors of qualitative research courses could use the whole series, presenting one method at a time to expose students to the range of qualitative research methods. Alternatively, instructors could focus on just a few approaches, as depicted in specific books, supplementing the books with examples from published studies using the approaches and providing experiential exercises to help students get started using the approaches. Other researchers will just use one book as they strive to master one qualitative approach for a specific research question.

In this book, Harriet Schwartz and Elizabeth Holloway present an excellent overview of constructivist critical incident technique (CIT). Given that many researchers are interested in specific key moments in life, CIT can help them organize how participants make meanings of these significant episodes.

Schwartz and Holloway are well positioned to help us understand CIT given their extensive body of research using this approach as well as their ability to clearly describe the steps.

—Clara E. Hill

1 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

These two conversations changed my life, they empowered me more than ever. From that point on, I knew I was great. I did not have to prove it, I just needed to be in a place where I could flourish. If my immediate manager did not appreciate me, fine, I will go do something else, either within that company, or with another company. I never questioned my value or my competence after that. I was not afraid to leave a company after that conversation. I had bad bosses, but a bad boss no longer defined my success.

—Participant 3 in Viscione, 2022, p. 115

Significant conversations, meaningful interactions, and moments that help or hinder, these instances shape and texture our understandings of self and other and influence progress (individually and organizationally) toward goals large and small. The *critical incident technique* (CIT) is a qualitative research methodology, applied across the social sciences and in other domains such as health care and business to deepen understanding of lived experience and to improve process and practice through the study of incidents—some memorable years later and others important in a given week and eventually

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Essentials of Constructivist Critical Incident Technique, by Harriet L. Schwartz and Elizabeth L. Holloway

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forgotten. The passage that opens this chapter illustrates the value of identifying and reflecting on critical incidents. The quote, offered by a participant in a CIT study on career advancement of Black women in Fortune 1000 companies, describes a pivotal moment in one woman's professional journey (Viscione, 2022).

WHAT IS CIT?

CIT is a structured yet flexible research methodology used to study lived experience and analyze critical or meaningful incidents or events. Researchers using CIT are positioned to explore how participants psychologically organize and make meaning of significant episodes and processes. CIT researchers may take a variety of approaches as they explore meaningful moments, uncover problem points in a system, or identify incidents that help or hinder movement toward a desired outcome.

Although CIT is typically underdocumented in reviews of qualitative methods, this technique has evolved since its development in the 1940s (Flanagan, 1947) and has gained traction across a range of domains, including business, communications, counseling, customer service, education, emergency services, hospitality, information technology, leadership, library science, management, medicine, nursing, psychology, public health, social work, and sport studies. Increasingly, graduate students choose CIT as a research method: ProQuest shows a steady increase in CIT theses and dissertations from 1 in the 1960s to 142 in the 1980s and 227 in the 2010s. Graduate students have used CIT to explore topics including recovery from occupational burnout (Woolgar, 2019), courageous followership (Paxton, 2021), and factors leading to homelessness (Stinson, 2010). CIT is valuable not only for scholar-practitioners but also for those in the field seeking to engage themselves and others in self-study and process review.

CONSTRUCTIVIST CIT

CIT is used effectively in both qualitative and quantitative contexts. In this book, we focus on qualitative approaches. Primarily, this volume introduces *constructivist critical incident technique*, a variation of the original methodology (constructivism and other philosophical foundations are discussed later in this chapter and throughout the book). CIT was developed and has been implemented primarily from positivist (Gremier, 2004) and postpositivist (Butterfield et al., 2005; McDaniel et al., 2020) epistemologies. Since the

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1990s, however, researchers have moved the methodology in a constructivist direction as well (Chell, 1998; Chell & Pittaway, 1998). Because CIT itself has been largely absent in the qualitative methodological literature, this introductory chapter focuses primarily on CIT, providing a foundation for our later explication of the constructivist approach. We continue to reference and discuss CIT throughout this book to help those new to the method gain an understanding of CIT as a long-standing approach and basis for the constructivist variation. “CIT” as used in this volume serves as an umbrella term for the methodology as it has been developed and understood historically and in the current qualitative realm, whereas “constructivist CIT” indicates the constructivist-specific approach.

CIT IN ACTION

We continue this introduction by exploring examples of CIT studies and applications to help orient readers to the kinds of questions asked via this method. Following these examples, we review key definitions, philosophical foundations, and CIT in the qualitative landscape, and we consider whether CIT is a method or methodology.

Assessing Process

John C. Flanagan and colleagues began developing CIT at the University of Pittsburgh in the 1940s to analyze processes related to U.S. Air Force pilot training, success, and failure. Flanagan (1954) believed that aviation assessment processes were insufficient, as evaluators often described pilot failure in vague terms such as “poor judgment” and “insufficient progress” (p. 328). With CIT, Flanagan (1954) sought to provide evaluators with a “systematic effort to gather specific incidents of effective or ineffective behavior with respect to a designated activity” (p. 328). While Flanagan was the sole author of this method-launching article, he acknowledged in the publication that a number of collaborators and graduate students conducted similar studies as he developed the method, utilizing a critical incident approach to identify “the critical requirements” (pp. 5–6) in a variety of other professions including: education, bookkeeping, life insurance, sales, and dentistry.

Recognizing Flanagan’s significant contribution, we begin with a contemporary example wherein CIT was used to assess a critical process: health care provided to women needing emergency obstetric care in northern Uganda (Alobo et al., 2021). CIT was one of two methods used to understand factors leading to maternal deaths and near-misses caused by process problems in

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Ugandan health care facilities. The researchers identified critical cases and interviewed medical doctors and women who had near-miss experiences, and then they diagrammed the process of emergency maternal care for each case.

Alobo et al. (2021) found that shortages of medicine, blood, and supplies, along with referral system obstacles and gaps in staff coverage and skills, were barriers that delayed critical care, leading to maternal death or near-miss incidents. Prior studies regarding maternal mortality and near-misses focused on biological causes of death; Alobo et al. (2021), utilizing CIT and participant interviews, situated researchers to surface problems in health care services and recommend potentially life-saving changes to the process.

Exploring Lived Experience

Although Flanagan (1954) developed CIT to assess task performance through direct observation and interviews, others have adapted the method using retrospective self-report to explore meaning-making and lived experience (Butterfield et al., 2005; Chell, 1998, 2014; Woolsey, 1986). For example, Mathew et al. (2023) employed *enhanced critical incident technique* (ECIT) to study “what helped and hindered the career decision-making of 18 Indigenous young adults in Canada who see themselves as doing well in this regard” (p. 6). Through this study, researchers identified 13 categories of incidents, including networking, knowledge/information/certainty, and experience. They also drew significant conclusions with potential to influence theory and practice. For example, Mathew et al. (2023) proposed reframing career development to align with a collectivist approach: “There is a call to rethink career as a merely individual enterprise, with success and failures mostly resting on the shoulders of the one making the decisions, and to reframe it as a contribution of and to the community” (p. 14).

As demonstrated by Alobo et al. (2021), CIT is an effective method for scholar-practitioners seeking actionable recommendations. Practical application is again evident in the study by Mathew et al. (2023), as researchers identified several implications for career counseling practice, including “an important need for career counsellors supporting Indigenous young adults to have a grounding in Indigenous cultural safety and an attitude of cultural humility when doing cross-cultural work” (p. 15).

Self-Study

The process of identifying and reflecting on critical incidents can also provide meaningful opportunities for self-study, helping learners deepen engagement

with their learning while educators potentially gain insight as well (Forsythe & Lander, 2003) and helping practitioners reflect and assess in the field (Brandenburg & McDonough, 2017). Stephen Brookfield, a scholar of adult learning, developed the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) to help learners consider moments they felt engaged or distanced in class as well as what they found helpful, confusing, and surprising (Brookfield, n.d.). He encourages educators to use this approach weekly to understand what is working well for students and where students are confused or disengaged and to share a summary with learners the following week. Brookfield noted that the CIQ helps him reflect on his teaching because it allows him to “see the classroom through students’ eyes” (Brookfield, n.d.). In the literature we reviewed, Brookfield’s writings do not acknowledge a connection between the CIQ and CIT; however, we see the CIQ as analogous to CIT so we include it here.

In related work, Brandenburg and McDonough (2017), who used critical incident identification and analysis to reflect critically on their practice as teacher educators, acknowledged both Brookfield and Flanagan as influences. Their study included teacher educators’ self-assessment using the CIQ and critical incident journaling and analysis. Engaging in this process, Brandenburg and McDonough identified and reflected on critical moments during a period of substantial institutional change. They identified several themes that deepened their understanding of their experiences and led to intentional practice. For example, they recognized tensions between their personal values and institutional values, and this awareness helped them resolve this tension “without surrendering our personal values in deference to institutional expectations” (p. 229). We believe this use of critical incidents for self-study holds significant potential as a tool for workplace self-reflection and a learning approach to self-assessment.

WHAT IS A CRITICAL INCIDENT?

In the following sections, we trace the terms incident and critical as they were first used and have been developed in CIT. In addition, we provide contemporary definitions and explore alternative language and related critique.

Incident

Definition of the term incident in the CIT context has evolved over time. Flanagan (1954) classified an incident as “any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to

be made about the person performing the act” (p. 327). As noted, Flanagan launched the method with instances collected through observation and interview. Building on Flanagan’s work, other researchers began using retrospective self-reported incidents as the primary source of data, and this approach continues in contemporary CIT (Butterfield et al., 2005; Gremler, 2004; McDaniel et al., 2013; Norman et al., 1992).

Thus, we suggest the following definition: an *incident* is an event, happening, or behavior in a process or person’s life that holds meaning and is recordable through retrospective recall or observation. Incidents have typically been identifiable as including an antecedent, the incident itself, and an outcome (Butterfield et al., 2005). However, incidents may not be clearly bounded with distinct antecedents and outcomes, but instead “may arise from respondents summarizing their overall experience within their description of one incident” (Norman et al., 1992, p. 590). Seeking to understand these variations in reporting, Chell (2014) proposed using the term *significant occurrences* to encompass “events, incidents, processes or issues” (p. 108) and Norman et al. (1992) suggested *critical happenings*. We discuss additional alternatives in Chapter 3.

Critical

Flanagan (1954) suggested that for an incident to be critical, it “must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects” (p. 327). Since Flanagan, understanding of the term *critical* has typically been centered in the meaning the participant makes, rather than that of an observer. Retrospective self-report inherently relies on participants’ meaning-making. Constructivist CIT researchers believe that self-reported incidents are intrinsically critical, as it is the participant’s meaning-making that holds significance. Conversely, researchers with a post-positivist orientation are likely to engage independent reviewers who assess incidents “to ensure that researchers are identifying information of critical importance to the participants reliably” (McDaniel et al., 2020, p. 747). We address these philosophical foundations later in this chapter and discuss their implications for the constructivist approach throughout the book.

Alternative Language and Critique

Several CIT scholars have suggested modifying use of the terms critical and incident, particularly in specific settings. For example, when used by professionals such as health care workers and first responders, the term *critical*

incident may suggest crisis situations rather than significant events unrelated to a crisis (Bradbury-Jones & Tranter, 2008; Norman et al., 1992). The term *incident* may be used to describe events such as patient falls and student altercations in settings such as health care facilities and schools, respectively. Thus, CIT researchers are advised to consider context when determining language to frame a study and shape interview questions.

Finally, some CIT scholars see this variation in language as a potential problem, believing that the lack of clear and consistent language may confuse novice researchers, result in inconsistent application of the method, and even lead to compromises regarding rigor. For a thorough exploration of these critiques, we refer readers to Butterfield et al. (2005), Bradbury-Jones and Tranter (2008), McDaniel et al. (2020), and Sharoff (2008). We find the variation in language to be a strength of the method, as it honors nuance and contextual factors across sectors. To maintain trustworthiness, particularly dependability, researchers who adjust language for context should make these choices explicit when reporting the study.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

CIT evolved from positivist roots and is now used primarily in postpositivist and constructivist contexts and is well-positioned for researchers working from a critical intersectional stance. For more in-depth considerations of various ontologies and epistemologies, we refer readers to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). However, we offer the following overview to set the context for the rest of this book.

Developing the CIT method in the 1940s and 1950s, Flanagan (1947, 1954) was clearly working in a positivist context. *Positivism* declares there is a single reality that can be known and measured by an objective researcher and that research can be value and bias free (McDaniel et al., 2020). As researchers expanded the use of the method and scholars challenged positivist ideas, CIT studies were more typically designed, completed, and assessed using a postpositivist philosophy (Butterfield et al., 2005; McDaniel et al., 2020). *Postpositivism* supposes a single reality but it acknowledges that it cannot be fully known and that although researchers cannot completely remove their influence from the study, they should strive for objectivity. Postpositivism is the unstated basis of many CIT studies and is the explicit foundation of ECIT (McDaniel et al., 2020).

In the 1990s, researchers proclaimed CIT's relevance as an interpretive approach, beginning to make the case for CIT as a constructivist methodology (Chell, 1998; Chell & Pittaway, 1998). For example, Chell and Pittaway

(1998) declared “reality is phenomenal and not concrete, that data are subjective and not objective and that knowledge is socially constructed and not positivist” (p. 25). Similarly, Ellinger shifted CIT in a constructivist direction in her doctoral dissertation, wherein she sought “to capture the beliefs or mental models of managers as they facilitated learning episodes” (Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002, p. 147).

With this volume, we seek to establish a clear and comprehensive constructivist approach to CIT—constructivist critical incident technique. *Constructivism* asserts that reality is socially constructed through meanings people make of themselves and their experiences, and that there is no singular truth (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers working from a constructivist stance acknowledge that they (shaped by their experiences, values, and perspectives) are present in the study and seek to understand and acknowledge their positionality while foregrounding meanings that participants make of the studied phenomenon. Table 1.1 presents an overview of constructivist CIT’s key characteristics.

Given its inductive approach and centering of participants, constructivist CIT is a powerful method for researchers working from a critical philosophical stance. Unlike ECIT (McDaniel et al., 2020) in which people outside the study are often called to assess elements of the project, including incident relevance and coding, constructivist CIT centers participants and their perspectives throughout the study. Critical constructivist CIT researchers embrace standpoint epistemology (Grimes, 2001), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2005), and cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Beyond these initial frames, definitions of qualitative research abound and evolve. For an in-depth exploration of historical and contemporary approaches, tensions, and claims regarding qualitative research, we refer readers to *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In addition,

TABLE 1.1. Key Characteristics of Constructivist Critical Incident Technique

Characteristic	Constructivist CIT
Researcher stance	Constructivist
Data sources	Interviews, Critical Incident Questionnaire, journals
Positionality	Researcher positionality acknowledged and articulated
Sample	Incidents as unit of analysis
Incident description	Contextualized incidents by the participant to elicit antecedent, incident, and outcome
Data coding	Structural, emergent
Data analysis	Constant comparison, interpretive, and reflexive
Reporting	Includes scope of study and researcher reflexivity

please note that constructivism differs from social constructionism: “Constructivism proposes that each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes, while social constructionism has a social rather than an individual focus” (Andrews, 2012, p. 1).

CIT IN THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH LANDSCAPE

Qualitative research is naturalistic (conducted in natural settings) and interpretive (concerned with how participants understand themselves and make meaning of their experiences) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). CIT meets these criteria as the researcher seeks to understand situated phenomena through perspectives of social actors, both the meanings they ascribe to their situations and their understandings of self. For example, Kellogg and Lidell (2012) explored “how critical incidents shape multiracial students’ understanding of race and identity at predominantly White institutions” (p. 524). In addition, CIT is used effectively to study large-scale social concerns, such as the aforementioned study of health care for pregnant women in Uganda (Alobo et al., 2021) and women’s experiences of microaggressions in health care systems (Piccinelli et al., 2020). Further, CIT is useful for exploratory work as well as model and theory building (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Gremier, 2004; Woolsey, 1986).

CIT and its variations are well-situated in the qualitative realm while also remaining distinct from other qualitative methods. In data collection, CIT researchers invite participants to share critical incidents and then the details around those incidents, whereas narrative and phenomenological researchers prompt participants to share the fullness of the story. Regarding analysis, CIT researchers analyze across incidents and participants, seeking to understand critical happenings. Conversely, narrative and phenomenological researchers initially keep participants’ stories intact, with the intention of understanding individual experiences; narrative researchers consider how the story is told; and phenomenologists explore the essence of the individual’s lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The focus of *grounded theory* is to study social processes and propose theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Like grounded theory, CIT may be used to study social processes (interactions and dynamics between and among people). Whereas grounded theory helps researchers understand an overarching social process in the studied phenomenon, CIT researchers focus on critical moments within the social process. In addition, theory development is an explicit goal of grounded theory, whereas CIT can be used descriptively or to develop theory.

As noted, focus on incidents (through both data collection and analysis) rather than larger stories is the primary defining characteristic of CIT and the method's most significant difference from other qualitative approaches. This focus affords the researcher a deeper exploration of significant events that might not be considered as fully with other methods. CIT researchers prompt participants to identify critical moments in the studied phenomenon, and this invites participants to focus on and explore these key events deeply and in context (Chell, 1998; Chell & Pittaway, 1998; Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002). For example, through the CIT interview structure, the researcher prompts participants to identify antecedents and outcomes that could be overlooked in other types of interviews that invite broader storytelling.

Although CIT is clearly a substantial stand-alone methodology, researchers also use CIT in tandem with other methods. Examples include case study and phenomenology (Chell, 1998, 2014), participatory action research (Chou et al., 2016), narrative analysis (Watkins et al., 2022), and arts-based approaches (Buckner, 2012; Stephenson, 2015).

Finally, CIT is well-suited to examine issues of social change. As an inductive methodology, CIT situates the researcher to work from a critical stance (Philpot et al., 2021; Piccinelli et al., 2020), address systemic inequities (Yonas et al., 2013), and problematize extant theory and de facto practices (Bott & Tourish, 2016). CIT positions the researcher to center voices that may be marginalized or disregarded, interrogate power structures, critically examine social inequities, and otherwise work from critical, intersectional, and decolonizing stances. CIT allows researchers to explore phenomena beyond the frames of tacitly accepted theories and to develop new theory (Woolsey, 1986). Constructivist CIT is particularly well-suited for research based on a critical or intersectional stance because it centers participants' meaning, whereas postpositivist CIT studies may not be a good fit for critical work if, for example, outside reviewers select from incidents reported, thus potentially overriding participant perspectives.

METHOD OR METHODOLOGY

Is CIT a method or a methodology? The answer to this question is complicated by the range of views regarding what constitutes method and methodology and, we suggest, by the way these terms are often used interchangeably in the literature and in research teaching and practice. For the purposes of this book, we align with the following definitions from Viergever (2019): the *methods* of a study are the “technical rules and procedures for data collection and analysis” (p. 1066), whereas *methodology* “provides guidance

throughout a research study, offering one approach that links the goal of the study to the unit of analysis, to the methods of data collection and analysis and to the reporting format” (p. 1067). CIT is positioned variously throughout the literature. For example, Butterfield et al. (2005) regarded CIT as a method, Viergever (2019) considered it a methodology, and Bradbury-Jones and Tranter (2008) declared that CIT is neither a method nor a methodology, acknowledging that they had no further recommendation about how to situate CIT in this debate.

We resonate with Viergever (2019) and consider contemporary CIT a methodology. At the same time, we recognize the uncertainty that the debate between method and methodology can create for novice researchers, and we hope to allay confusion. We suggest that students will strengthen their ability and confidence as emerging scholars by seeking to understand this debate and related definitional differences, while keeping in mind that the terms method and methodology are often used interchangeably in teaching and scholarly writing.

AUTHORS' NOTE

Throughout this book, we share numerous examples of CIT studies to illustrate the range of the methodology's application and to illuminate study design and implementation. In addition, we continue to draw on the work of Pamela Viscione, PhD, who we cited at the beginning of this chapter. Dr. Viscione's 2022 study provides a powerful example of constructivist CIT. In addition, we know this study well, as we both worked with Dr. Viscione while she was a student: Elizabeth initially mentored Dr. Viscione in CIT and then Harriet served as the methodologist on Dr. Viscione's dissertation. Further, Dr. Viscione researched and wrote her dissertation while we were writing this book, so we were aware of many of her decision points and other nuances of her study.

Dr. Viscione employed constructivist CIT to identify critical incidents that helped and hindered Black women's career advancement in Fortune 1000 corporations. Her study illuminates the strengths of constructivist CIT to consider a social phenomenon from the perspective of those who live the experience. We extend deep gratitude to Dr. Viscione for sharing her work to help others learn the method and for providing feedback on an early draft of this manuscript.

Dr. Viscione's study demonstrates the depth that constructivist CIT can bring to a critical exploration of lived experience. In constructivist CIT research, the participants, their recall, and their perspectives center the study. Dr. Viscione,

who previously identified as a quantitative researcher, began exploring qualitative methods and considered using grounded theory. After talking with faculty, she clarified that she was committed to understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of women who have lived it, she was interested in critical moments or turning points, and she wanted participants to declare what they found meaningful rather than having outside reviewers assess the criticality of their experiences. With this clarity, Dr. Viscione found a methodological fit with constructivist CIT.