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Designing a Qualitative Study

I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply. Like the loom on which fabric is woven, general worldviews and perspectives hold qualitative research together. To describe these frameworks, qualitative researchers use terms—constructivist, interpretivist, feminist, methodology, postmodernist, and naturalistic research. Within these worldviews and through these lenses are approaches to qualitative inquiry, such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. This field has many different individuals with different perspectives who are on their own looms creating the fabric of qualitative research. Aside from these differences, the creative artists are all at work making a fabric. In other words, there are characteristics common to all forms of qualitative research, and the different characteristics will receive different emphases depending on the qualitative project.

The basic intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of and introduction to qualitative research so that we can see the common characteristics of qualitative research before we explore the different threads of it. I begin with a general definition of qualitative research and highlight the essential characteristics of conducting this form of inquiry. I then discuss the types of research problems and issues best suited for a qualitative study and emphasize the requirements needed to conduct this rigorous, time-consuming research. Given that you have the essentials (the problem, the time) to engage in this inquiry, I then sketch out the overall process involved in designing and planning a study. I end by suggesting several outlines that you might

consider as the overall structure for planning or proposing a qualitative research study. The chapters to follow will then address the different types of inquiry approaches. The general design features, outlined here, will be refined for the five approaches emphasized in this book.

Questions for Discussion

- What are the key characteristics of qualitative research?
- Why do researchers conduct a qualitative study?
- What is required to undertake this type of research?
- How do researchers design a qualitative study?
- What topics should be addressed in a plan or proposal for a qualitative study?

The Characteristics of Qualitative Research

I typically begin talking about qualitative research by posing a definition for it. This seemingly uncomplicated approach has become more difficult in recent years. I note that some extremely useful introductory books to qualitative research these days do not contain a definition that can be easily located (Morse & Richards, 2002, 2007; Weis & Fine, 2000). Perhaps this has less to do with the authors' decision to convey the nature of this inquiry and more to do with a concern about advancing a "fixed" definition. It is interesting, however, to look at the evolving definition by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005) as their *Handbook of Qualitative Research* has moved through time. Their definition conveys the ever-changing nature of qualitative inquiry from social construction, to interpretivist, and on to social justice. I include their latest definition here:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

Although some of the traditional approaches to qualitative research, such as the "interpretive, naturalistic approach" and "meanings," are evident in this definition, the definition also has a strong orientation toward the impact of qualitative research and in transforming the world.

As an applied research methodologist, my working definition of qualitative research emphasizes the design of research and the use of distinct approaches to inquiry (e.g., ethnography, narrative). At this time, I provide this definition:

> *Qualitative research* begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action.

Notice in this definition that I place emphasis on the *process* of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions, to worldviews and through a theoretical lens, and on to the procedures involved in studying social or human problems. Then, a framework exists for the procedures—the approach to inquiry, such as grounded theory, or case study research. At a more micro level are the procedures that are common to all forms of qualitative research.

Examine Table 3.1 for three recent introductory qualitative research books and the characteristics they espouse for doing a qualitative study. As compared to a similar table I designed almost 10 years ago in the first edition of this book (drawing on other authors), qualitative research today involves closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and situating the study within the political, social, and cultural context of the researchers, the participants, and the readers of a study. By examining Table 3.1, one can arrive at several common characteristics of qualitative research. These are presented in no specific order of importance:

- *Natural setting*—Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants' experience the issue or problem under study. They do not bring individuals into a lab (a contrived situation), nor do they typically send out instruments for individuals to complete. This up-close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research. In the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction over time.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Characteristics	*LeCompte & Schensul (1999)*	*Marshall & Rossman (2006)*	*Hatch (2002)*
Natural setting (field focused), a source of data for close interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes
Researcher as key instrument of data collection			Yes
Multiple data sources in words or images	Yes	Yes	
Analysis of data inductively, recursively, interactively	Yes	Yes	Yes
Focus on participants' perspectives, their meanings, their subjective views	Yes		Yes
Framing of human behavior and belief within a social-political/historical context or through a cultural lens	Yes		
Emergent rather than tightly prefigured design		Yes	Yes
Fundamentally interpretive inquiry—researcher reflects on her or his role, the role of the reader, and the role of the participants in shaping the study		Yes	
Holistic view of social phenomena		Yes	Yes

- *Researcher as key instrument.* The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. They may use a protocol—an instrument for collecting data—but the researchers are the ones who actually gather the information. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers.

- *Multiple sources of data.* Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data and make sense of them, organizing them into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources.

- *Inductive data analysis.* Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the "bottom-up," by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. This inductive process

involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes. It may also involve collaborating with the participants interactively, so that they have a chance to shape the themes or abstractions that emerge from the process.

- *Participants' meanings.* In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature.

- *Emergent design.* The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data. For example, the questions may change, the forms of data collection may shift, and the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified. The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information.

- *Theoretical lens.* Qualitative researchers often use a lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture, central to ethnography, or gendered, racial, or class differences from the theoretical orientations discussed in Chapter 2. Sometimes, the study may be organized around identifying the social, political, or historical context of the problem under study.

- *Interpretive inquiry.* Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers' interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understandings. After a research report is issued, the readers make an interpretation as well as the participants, offering yet other interpretations of the study. With the readers, the participants, and the researchers all making an interpretation, we can see how multiple views of the problem can emerge.

- *Holistic account.* Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation.

When to Use Qualitative Research

When is it appropriate to use qualitative research? We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration

is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silenced voices. These are all good reasons to explore a problem rather than to use predetermined information from the literature or rely on results from other research studies. We also conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. To further de-emphasize a power relationship, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions, or by having them collaborate with us during the data analysis and interpretation phases of research. We conduct qualitative research when we want to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories, or theater, or poems, without the restrictions of formal academic structures of writing. We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it—whether this context is their home, family, or work. We use qualitative research to follow up quantitative research and help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models. These theories provide a general picture of trends, associations, and relationships, but they do not tell us about why people responded as they did, the context in which they responded, and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that governed their responses. We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not *fit* the problem. Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences. To level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies. Qualitative approaches are simply a better fit for our research problem.

What does it take to engage in this form of research? To undertake qualitative research requires a strong commitment to study a problem and demands time and resources. Qualitative research keeps good company with the most rigorous quantitative research, and it should not be viewed as an

easy substitute for a "statistical" or quantitative study. Qualitative inquiry is for the researcher who is willing to do the following:

- Commit to extensive time in the field. The investigator spends many hours in the field, collects extensive data, and labors over field issues of trying to gain access, rapport, and an "insider" perspective.
- Engage in the complex, time-consuming process of data analysis through the ambitious task of sorting through large amounts of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories. For a multidisciplinary team of qualitative researchers, this task can be shared; for most researchers, it is a lonely, isolated time of struggling with the data. The task is challenging, especially because the database consists of complex texts and images.
- Write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims and the writer needs to show multiple perspectives. The incorporation of quotes to provide participants' perspectives also lengthens the study.
- Participate in a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and constantly changing. This guideline complicates telling others how one plans to conduct a study and how others might judge it when the study is completed.