Realizing the Potential of Qualitative Designs: A Conceptual Guide for Research and Practice

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Abstract: This inquiry is based on the collaboration of the authors who have co-taught qualitative research methods courses at a major Midwestern university. We provide a conceptual guide for those new to qualitative research interested in developing a research project and for those beginning to explore the potential of qualitative methods for the study of educational problems and issues. We identify key aspects of qualitative research and provide insights as to how contemporary scholars within this tradition have framed this diverse and multifaceted family of approaches for educational and social research. We also identify important historical and contemporary references to help get started, and offer suggestions to better inform strategic decision-making needed to realize the potential of qualitative designs for strengthening the link between research and practice in the fields of education and the social sciences.

Introduction

The relatively recent proliferation of qualitative methods has had a profound impact on the research enterprise in education, health care, nursing, sociology, anthropology, psychology, management, information systems, etc., gaining considerable popularity among those fields that have a heavy bent towards practice. Yet for contemporary researchers interested in realizing the potential of qualitative designs, selection of an appropriate methodology and its operationalization in the field can prove daunting and not as superfluous as hoped. An “embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 20) which can overwhelm students of qualitative methods and intimidate even more seasoned researchers attempting to advance their own research agendas or advise students in an informed and potentially rewarding manner. In this inquiry, we identify important issues that need to be taken into account when embarking on a qualitative research project, consider how scholars of this literature have organized this material, and offer suggestions as to how to begin to implement various approaches in the field. We provide a brief overview of the history of qualitative research, stress the importance of understanding the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative designs, and consider definitions, characteristics, and when to use qualitative methods. We also identify popular qualitative approaches and touch upon other pivotal considerations impacting their use. We underscore the need for a critical and analytic approach involving informed and systematic choices throughout all phases of a research project to fully realize the potential of qualitative designs for improving links between research and practice.

The History of Qualitative Research

Although the use of qualitative research has a long history in education and the social sciences (see Vidich & Lyman, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, for an overview of these traditions), Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) “Second and Third Movements of Qualitative Research”—the Modernist and Blurred Genres phases extending from the early
1960’s through the 1970s—marked the beginning of the “qualitative revolution” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2005; Charmaz, 2000) that rapidly gained momentum across disciplines. This era saw the publication of the canonical works of Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss’ (1961) Boys in White, Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) The Discovery of Grounded Theory, Blumer’s (1969) Symbolic Interactionism, Geertz’s (1973) The Interpretation of Cultures, Guba’s (1978) Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation, Spradley’s The Ethnographic Interview (1979) and Participant Observation (1980), and the work of others particularly in the anthropology of education (e.g., George and Louise Spindler, Harry Wolcott, etc.). These scholars built upon early to mid-1900s pioneering ethnographic fieldwork of anthropologists (e.g., Boas, Malinowski, Evans-Pritchard, Radcliffe-Brown, Mead), and the “Chicago School” sociologists (e.g., Park, Burgess, Thomas, Wirth) to set the stage for the modern tradition of qualitative research and spark a shift in many camps from quantitative to qualitative designs.

**Philosophical, Epistemological, and Theoretical Considerations**

After becoming familiar with historical traditions contributing to contemporary forms of qualitative research, the next step is to tackle what scholars have referred to by a variety of terms including philosophical or epistemological perspectives, orientations, or traditions, interpretive paradigms or worldviews, theoretical underpinnings, traditions, orientations, or perspectives, or alternative approaches to science. (Hatch, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Glesne, 2011). Influenced by Kuhn’s (1970) notion of paradigm (Hatch, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Glesne, 2011), a philosophical orientation is conceptualized as a “worldview that underlies and informs methodology and methods” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 1), or a “basic set of beliefs that guide action” (Guba, 1990, p. 17; and see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 22). As Merriam (2009) cautions, however, “there is almost no consistency among writers in how this aspect of qualitative research is discussed” (p. 8).

For example, Hatch (2002) identifies five research paradigms (positivist, postpositivist, constructivist, critical/feminist, and poststructuralist), and poses ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions for each. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) discuss interpretive paradigms viewed as “the net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises” (p. 22). Newman (2006), in his thorough treatment of this topic, lists three alternative approaches to social science (positivist, interpretive, and critical), Merriam (2009) advocates four philosophical perspectives (positivist, interpretive, critical, and poststructural/postmodern), and Glesne (2011) presents these same four paradigmatic families. In his insightful and illuminating organizational scheme, Creswell (2007) discusses philosophical assumptions (ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological), worldviews (postpositivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism), and interpretive communities (postmodernism, feminist theories, critical theory and critical race theory, queer theory, and disability theory).

Although potentially daunting to those unfamiliar with this material, gaining an understanding of these philosophical orientations provides a foundation for researchers to position themselves when conceptualizing their own research designs, a rationale for choosing qualitative methods (as opposed to quantitative) to answer a research question or questions, and why a specific approach (e.g., phenomenology, case study, etc.) and type of approach (e.g., constructivist vs. objectivist grounded theory) was selected over other options.
Definitions, Characteristics, and When to Use Qualitative Research

Given the extensive range of approaches that make up the family of methodologies falling under the rubric of “qualitative research”, it is not surprising that some of the leading scholars in the field have offered lengthy definitions of this enterprise (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3; Creswell, 2007, p. 37). Presenting more concise but less encompassing efforts, Bogdan and Biklen (2007) define qualitative research as “an approach to social science research that emphasizes collecting descriptive data in natural settings, uses inductive thinking, and emphasizes understanding the subjects point of view” (p. 274), while Glesne’s (2011) definition reads, “a type of research that focuses on qualities such as words or observations that are difficult to quantify and lend themselves to interpretation or deconstruction” (p. 283).

There is also some room for interpretation among scholars regarding shared characteristics of qualitative designs that distinguish them from more traditional quantitative approaches, and, for that matter, the desirable attributes or competencies needed by the researchers themselves to conduct “good” qualitative research. Hatch (2002), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Creswell (2007), Morse and Richards (2007), Corbin and Strauss (2008), Merriam (2009), and Stake (2010) all list central characteristics of qualitative research, finding common ground along a number of dimensions. Some of the more frequently cited attributes include long-term face-to-face research conducted in naturalistic settings, a focus on rich description and the understanding of participants’ points of view or meanings, the researcher as the primary data collection instrument, inductive data analysis, a concern with process, an emergent and flexible design, nonrandom, purposeful sample selection, and a holistic understanding achieved through collection and analysis of multiple sources of data and perspectives. Researchers purportedly benefit from having a humanistic orientation and are comfortable with ambiguity, analytical and introspective, willing to take risks, ambitious and dedicated enough to embrace the substantial commitment required to conduct qualitative research, flexible, open-minded, and able to see things from multiple perspectives. In effect, one must be able to stand comfortably at the intersection of art and science (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, pp. 4-6; Creswell, 2007, p. 41; Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13; Merriam, 2009, pp. 16-18).

In a related vein, most scholars of qualitative methods also discuss criteria important for choosing to conduct a qualitative study (Hatch, 2002; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Richards & Morse, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2010). These criteria include such factors as the research problem or question requires it, to better understand an area where little is known, to make sense of complex situations, contexts, and settings, to learn how participants construct their worlds, to gain deep, rich and detailed descriptions of cultural scenes, to help empower individuals to share their stories and enact meaningful social change, and to generate theory where little exists (see Creswell, 2007, pp. 39-41; Richards & Morse, 2007, pp. 29-31). Of course, these attributes underscore the viability of qualitative methods to bolster the link between research and practice in practitioner-driven fields.

Selecting a Qualitative Methodology or Approach

We have provided several underlying characteristics shared in whole or in part by qualitative research designs that separate them from more traditional quantitative forms of inquiry. As mentioned above, there are a seemingly endless number of approaches from which to choose, each different in varying degrees in terms of their epistemological underpinnings,
theoretical assumptions, and modus operandi impacting all aspects of the research process. Hatch (2002), Denzin and Lincoln (2005), and Bogdan and Biklen (2007) identify and discuss various approaches to qualitative research, and Creswell (2007) provides a comprehensive table (pp. 7-8) of how other authors have historically organized this material.

For the purposes of this discussion, we find Creswell (2007), Richards and Morse (2007), Merriam (2009), and Glesne (2011) most instructive, because these authors identify popular contemporary methodologies, describe unique characteristics of each, and offer suggestions as to how to decide between them when planning one’s research. In the most thorough treatment of this subject, Creswell (2007) systematically outlines the use of five approaches (narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study) derived from a lifetime of work both conducting research and teaching and mentoring students on qualitative methods. Similarly, Merriam (2009), another noted scholar within the qualitative tradition, outlines six approaches (basic qualitative research, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative analysis, critical research, and case study) in her well-conceptualized text on qualitative research. Richards and Morse (2007) provide practical overviews of phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory, whereas Glesne (2011) covers five “interpretive traditions of qualitative inquiry” (p. 16) including ethnography, life history, grounded theory, case study, and action research. Important references to consider when getting started are for basic qualitative research (Maxwell, 2005), ethnography (Spradley, 1979; 1980; Van Maanen, 1988; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Wolcott, 1999; Fetterman, 2010), phenomenology (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994), grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Clarke, 2005; Charmaz, 2006; Morse et al., 2009; Babchuk, 2010), case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003; Merriam, 2009), narrative (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), and critical research (see, Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2006). For a more comprehensive list consult Richards and Morse (2007).

Conclusion

We have taken initial steps in developing a conceptual guide for those wanting to learn more about qualitative methods. More complete guidelines would take into account several other central and integrally overlapping aspects involved in the design and implementation of a research project. These aspects extend and elaborate upon what we have presented here, taking into account a host of theoretical and procedural considerations. These include identifying a research area or problem, the use of literature in qualitative research, developing a qualitative purpose statement, writing research questions and sub-questions, selecting a sample, employing methods of data collection and analysis, presenting the findings, writing up qualitative research, the use of terminology, implementing computer software for qualitative data analysis, ethical considerations, and suggestions for writing theses, dissertations, and publications. Key texts that can provide further guidance in these areas have been identified above and include Creswell (2007), Richards and Morse (2007), Merriam (2009) and Glesne (2010).

In conclusion, it has been argued that qualitative research methods have become increasingly popular over the past few decades and are continuing to make strides in realizing their potential in practitioner-driven fields such as education, health care, nursing, and social work. As has been documented elsewhere (Babchuk, 1997; 2009; 2010), qualitative research designs hold considerable potential for exploring problems germane to adult and continuing education, and underscore the increasingly popular belief that these methods can be uniquely effective for addressing a dynamic range of issues impacting research and practice in the field.
References


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