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The Nature of Qualitative Research

*Experiential understanding • Interpretation as
method • Other characteristics of qualitative
research • Recognition of faults*

There is no single wellspring of qualitative research. Its history is extensive, drawing from the evolving curiosities of humankind over the centuries, formally disciplined by ethnographers, social psychologists, historians, and literary critics (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982; Eco, 1994; Hamilton, 1981; Stake, 1978). One century ago, philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey argued that science was *not* moving in the direction of helping humans understand themselves:

Only from his actions, his fixed utterances, his effects upon others, can man learn about himself; thus he learns to know himself only by the round-about way of understanding. What

we once were, how we developed and became what we are, we learn from the way in which we acted, the plans which we once adopted, the way in which we made ourselves felt in our vocation, from old dead letters, from judgments on which were spoken long ago. . . . We understand ourselves and others only when we transfer our own lived experience into every kind of expression of our own and other people's lives. (Dilthey, quoted in Richman, 1976, p. 163)

Science can deal with these personal and situational moments but most "human scientists" prefer to study aggregates of populations rather than the uniquenesses of individual lives. This distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods is a matter of emphasis—for both are mixtures. In each ethnographic or naturalistic or phenomenological or hermeneutic or holistic study (i.e., in each qualitative study), enumeration and recognition of differences-in-amount have prominent places. And in each statistical survey and controlled experiment (i.e., in each quantitative study), natural-language description and researcher interpretation are important.

One research methodologist, Philip Runkel (1990), described what researchers do as casting nets and testing specimens. For finding common relationships among cases, we cast nets to catch many cases. For finding how an individual case works, we examine single specimens. Runkel called casting nets, that is, aggregating measures across cases, the method of relative frequencies. Case study researchers, both qualitative and quantitative in orientation, cast nets when they look at frequencies within the case, such as how many graduates wore white caps at the graduation ceremony, and when they do cross-case analyses. Runkel labeled it the method of specimens when the intent is to learn about the species by examining a sample, a big sample or a sample of one. Case study researchers use the method of specimens as their primary method to come to know extensively and intensively about the single case. With intrinsic case study, there is little interest in generalizing to

the species; the abiding interest is in the particular case, yet there too the case researcher examines a part or the whole, seeking to understand what the specimen is, how the specimen works.

Three major differences in qualitative and quantitative emphasis deserve attention: (1) the distinction between explanation and understanding as the purpose of inquiry; (2) the distinction between a personal and impersonal role for the researcher, and (3) a distinction between knowledge discovered and knowledge constructed. I am going to postpone a discussion of constructivist knowledge until Chapter 6. The other two distinctions are discussed now.

Experiential Understanding

A distinction between what knowledge to shoot for fundamentally separates quantitative and qualitative inquiry. Perhaps surprisingly, the distinction is not directly related to the difference between quantitative and qualitative data, but a difference in searching for causes versus searching for happenings. Quantitative researchers have pressed for explanation and control; qualitative researchers have pressed for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists. The distinction between inquiry for making explanations versus inquiry for promoting understanding has been nicely developed by Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright (1971) in his book, *Explanation and Understanding*:

Practically every explanation, be it causal or teleological or of some other kind, can be said to further our understanding of things. But "understanding" also has a psychological ring which "explanation" has not. This psychological feature was emphasized by several of the nineteenth-century antipositivist methodologists, perhaps most forcefully by Simmel who thought that understanding as a method characteristic of the

humanities is a form of *empathy* or re-creation in the mind of the scholar of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts and feelings and motivations, of the objects of his study. . . . Understanding is also connected with *intentionality* in a way that explanation is not. One understands the aims and purposes of an agent, the meaning of a sign or symbol, and the significance of a social institution or religious rite. This intentionalistic . . . dimension of understanding has come to play a prominent role in more recent methodological discussion. (p. 6)

Von Wright granted that explanations are intended to promote understanding and understanding is sometimes expressed in terms of explanation—but the two aims are epistemologically quite different. He emphasized a difference important to us, the difference between case studies seeking to identify cause and effect relationships and those seeking understanding of human experience.

In the previous chapter were two examples of issue questions as follows:

- Ⓓ₁: Is the fact that teaching loads have increased from four classes to five affecting the quality of teaching?
- Ⓓ₂: Are the teachers residing outside the community doing less than a fair share of the work?

The first is an example of a search for a cause of the quality of teaching (i.e., for an explanation), the type of question more common in quantitative case study. The second is an example of a search for understanding, a description of things happening more or less at the same time without expectation of causal explanation. Such noncausal contingency descriptions as Ⓓ₂ are commonly asked for by the issue questions of qualitative case study. The description of Harper School in Chapter 10 seldom explained why things were the way they were; rather, it described in depth how things were at a particular place at a particular time.

Von Wright also spoke of empathy, the knowledge of the plight of another by experiencing it yourself. Qualitative research tries to establish an empathetic understanding for the reader, through description, sometimes *thick description*, conveying to the reader what experience itself would convey.

Following the guidance of Dilthey, the qualitative case study researcher has tried to facilitate reader understanding, an understanding that important human actions are seldom simply caused and usually not caused in ways that can be discovered. It is enough to recognize some of the many coexisting happenings (e.g., the meeting's contentiousness, the change in the weather, the message in the mail, an unexpected expression of trust—some of which may have an influence on this afternoon's decisions). Such complex events occur all the time, with little opportunity or even possibility of teasing out the causes. The deterioration of a school system or the success of teaching change in one classroom can have neither simple causes nor manifestations. To the qualitative scholar, the understanding of human experience is a matter of chronologies more than of causes and effects.

Quantitative research methods have grown out of scientific search for cause and effect expressed ultimately in grand theory. To establish generalizations that hold over diverse situations, most social-science-oriented researchers make observations in diverse situations. They try to eliminate the merely situational, letting contextual effects "balance each other out." They try to nullify context in order to find the most general and pervasive explanatory relationships. Generalization is an important aim, with relevance to other cases hoped for. Quantitative researchers regularly treat uniqueness of cases as "error," outside the system of explained science. Qualitative researchers treat the uniqueness of individual cases and contexts as important to understanding. Particularization is an important aim, coming to know the particularity of the case.

Let me draw from my own experience to mention that most program evaluation work has been dominated by the search for

grand explanation. Employment of formal measurement and statistical analysis, i.e., quantification, has occurred in order to permit simultaneous study of a large number of dissimilar cases, in order to put the researcher in a position to make formal generalizations about the program. The inappropriateness of such a statistical, basic-science approach for program evaluation has been raised by Michael Scriven (1978) and Lee Cronbach and Associates (1980) on the grounds of the particularity of the program, its situationality, and its political context. Both have emphasized the evaluator's responsibility for authoring program-specific descriptions and interpretations.

These epistemological concerns double back to the ordinary meanings of quantitative and qualitative study. To sharpen the search for explanation, quantitative researchers perceive what is happening in terms of descriptive variables, represent happenings with scales and measurements (i.e., numbers). To sharpen the search for understanding, qualitative researchers perceive what is happening in key episodes or testimonies, represent happenings with their own direct interpretation and stories (i.e., narratives). Qualitative research uses these narratives to optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case.

Interpretation as Method

Qualitative advocates such as Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1982) and Elliot Eisner and Alan Peshkin (1990) place high priority on direct interpretation of events, lower priority on the interpretation of measurement data. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy (1869/1978) said,

Through reason man observes himself; but he knows himself only through consciousness. (p. 1427)

All research depends on interpretation, but with standard quantitative designs there is an effort to limit the role of personal interpretation for that period between the time the research design is set and the time the data are collected and analyzed statistically—sometimes thought of as a “value free” period. Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective judgment, analyzing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness.

This qualitative-quantitative difference is linked to two kinds of research questions. In quantitative studies, the research question seeks out a relationship between a small number of variables. For example, “Is there an enduring correlation between student achievement, and the training of the teachers over a variety of classroom and community situations?” Efforts are made to operationally bound the inquiry, to define the variables, and to minimize the importance of interpretation until data are analyzed. At the very beginning, it is important for quantifiers to interpret how relationships between variables would reduce weaknesses in explanation, and at closing, it is important for the researchers to upgrade their generalizations about the variables. In between times, it is important not to let interpretation change the course of the study.

In qualitative studies, research questions typically orient to cases or phenomena, seeking patterns of unanticipated as well as expected relationships. For example, “What happens to personal relationships among teachers in a remedial reading project if they are obligated to employ a problem-solving pedagogy?” Or if the project had been implemented sometime in the past, what happened to such personal relationships? The dependent variables are experientially rather than operationally defined. Situational conditions are not known in advance or controlled. Even the independent variables are expected to develop in unexpected ways. It is essential to have the interpretive powers of the research team in

immediate touch with developing events and ongoing revelations, partly to redirect observations and to pursue emerging issues. Thus the allocation of resources is different. Reliance on carefully developed instruments and controlled redundancy of observations typical in a quantitative study gives way to placement of the most skilled researchers directly in contact with the phenomena and making much more subjective claims as to the meanings of data. The greatest allocation of expertise is needed by the one group well prior to data gathering for development of instrumentation and by the other group at the site for making interpretive observations.

In his fine summary of the nature of qualitative study in Wittrock's *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Frederick Erickson (1986) claimed that the primary characteristic of qualitative research is the centrality of interpretation. He said that the findings are not so much "findings" as "assertions." Given intense interaction of the researcher with persons in the field and elsewhere, given a constructivist orientation to knowledge (see Chapter 6), given the attention to participant intentionality and sense of self, however descriptive the report, the researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view.

Erickson drew attention to the ethnographers' traditional emphasis on emic issues, those concerns and values recognized in the behavior and language of the people being studied. Clifford Geertz (1973) called it "thick description." Thick description is not complexities objectively described; it is the particular perceptions of the actors. Can readers accept subjective description? Often, the researcher's aim is not veridical representation so much as stimulation of further reflection, optimizing readers' opportunity to learn. Deborah Trumbull and I (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) called experiential learning "naturalistic generalization" and proposed that the qualitative researcher could organize the study to maximize the opportunity for naturalistic generalization. The study then would rely on actor and reader experience in ways already common in disciplined study of many kinds, such as historiogra-

phy, philosophy, literature, and music. Claude Debussy, on composing *La Mer* not at sea but in his Paris studio, said,

I have my memories and they are better than the seascapes themselves whose beauty often deadens thought. My listeners have their own store of memories for me to dredge up. (Cox, p. 26)

The function of research is not necessarily to map and conquer the world but to sophisticate the beholding of it. "Thick description," "experiential understanding," and "multiple realities"¹ are expected in qualitative case studies. Pursuit of complex meanings cannot be just designed in or caught retrospectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It seems to require continuous attention, an attention seldom sustained when the dominant instruments of data gathering are objectively interpretable checklists or survey items. An ongoing interpretive role of the researcher is prominent in qualitative case study.

Other Characteristics of Qualitative Research

In addition to its orientation away from cause and effect explanation and toward personal interpretation, qualitative inquiry is distinguished by its emphasis on holistic treatment of phenomena (Schwandt, 1994). I have remarked already on the epistemology of qualitative researchers as existential (nondeterminist) and constructivist. These two views are common accompanists to an expectation that phenomena are intricately related through many coincidental actions and that understanding them requires looking at a wide sweep of contexts: temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, and personal.

1. People perceive things differently, not just through unsophistication but because meanings are determined partly by experience. The handling of different realities is discussed in Chapter 6.

Thus the case, the activity, the event, are seen as unique as well as common. Understanding each one requires an understanding of other cases, activities, and events but also an understanding of each one's uniqueness. Uniqueness is established not particularly by comparing it on a number of variables—there may be few ways in which this one strays from the norm—but the case is seen by people close at hand to be, in many ways, unprecedented and important, in other words, a critical uniqueness. Readers are drawn to this sense of uniqueness as they read narratives, vignettes, and experiential accounts (Van Maanan, 1988). The collection of features, the sequence of happenings, is felt to be different. The uniquenesses are expected to be critical to the understanding of the particular case.

For all their intrusion into habitats and personal affairs, qualitative researchers are noninterventionists. They try to see what would have happened had they not been there. During fieldwork, they try not to draw attention to themselves or their work. Other than positioning themselves, they try to avoid creating situations to test their hypotheses. They try to observe the ordinary, and they try to observe it long enough to comprehend what, for this case, ordinary means. For them, naturalistic observation has been the primary medium of acquaintance. When they cannot see for themselves, they ask others who have seen. When formal records have been kept, they pour over the documents. But most of them favor a personal capture of the experience so, from their own involvement,² they can interpret it, recognize its contexts, puzzle the many meanings while still there, and pass along an experiential, naturalistic account for readers to participate themselves in some similar reflection.

All research is a search for patterns, for consistencies. In Harper School, I found a number of patterns relevant to my issues and important for my report. For example, I found a pattern of teach-

2. Participant observation is a technical approach developed by ethnographers for observing while taking an active role in the group being studied. See Schatzman and Strauss (1973).

ers placing behavioral disorder as a matter more in need of immediate attention than poor academic performance. Also, I found that the pattern of reliance on bureaucratic offices disrupted by school reform diminished. What I call correlation or covariation in quantitative study, I call pattern in qualitative study. When I think of an important issue, I try to think of patterns to help my reader understand the case better.

Recognition of Faults

Qualitative study has everything wrong with it that its detractors claim (for doubts expressed by case study specialists, see Rob Walker's, 1981, "Three Reasons for Not Doing Case Study Research" and Matthew Miles's, 1979, "Qualitative Data as an Attractive Nuisance"). Qualitative inquiry is subjective. New puzzles are produced more frequently than solutions to old ones. Its contributions to disciplined science are slow and tendentious. The results pay off little in the advancement of social practice. The ethical risks are substantial. And the cost in time and money is high, very high.

The intent of qualitative researchers to promote a *subjective* research paradigm is a given. Subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding. Still, personal understanding frequently is misunderstood by the researchers and by their readers (Phillips, 1990). The misunderstanding will occur because the researcher-interpreters are unaware of their own intellectual shortcomings and because of the weaknesses in methods that fail to purge misinterpretations. Qualitative researchers have a respectable concern for validation of observations, they have routines for "triangulation" (see Chapter 7) that approximate in purpose those in the quantitative fields, but they do not have widely agreed-upon protocols that put subjective misunderstandings to a stiff enough test.

The phenomena studied by qualitative researchers often take long to happen, and they evolve along the way. Often, we need a

long time to come to understand what is going on. The work is labor intensive, and the costs are hard to trim. Many studies only continue because they are labors of love. Many of the findings are esoteric. The worlds of commerce and social service benefit all too little from investments in formal qualitative studies. The return may be greater for those who study their own rooms, shops, and systems by these methods, but self-study seldom brings enough of the disciplined eye of the specialist into play.

Many qualitative studies are personalistic studies. Impersonal issues applied to carefully observed human beings become personal issues. Privacy is always at risk. Entrapment is regularly on the horizon as the researcher, although a dedicated noninterventionist, raises questions and options previously not considered by the respondent. A tolerable frailty of conduct nearby becomes questionable ethic when it appears in distant narrative. Some of us "go native," accommodating to the viewpoint and valuation of the people at the site—then revert, reacting less in their favor when back again with academic colleagues (Stake, 1986).

Choosing to go qualitative is not simply a matter of whether the gains in perspective are worth these costs. The attraction of intensive and interpretive study are ever apparent, even as they were when qualitative study was considered unworthy of respect by many research agencies and faculties. Humans generally are curious, and researchers have a special compulsion to inquire. To an extent, they are controlled by the rules of funding and their disciplines, but that controls only whether or not they will report their use of qualitative methods—all researchers will use them. There are times when all researchers are going to be interpretive, holistic, naturalistic, and uninterested in cause, and then, by definition, they will be qualitative inquirers.



WORKSHOP



Midway through the first week of our two-week seminar, I divided my Umeå graduate students into four small groups and numbered them from one to four. I asked them to imagine they were observing a group of students getting ready for the graduation ceremony. They were then to describe some things they imagined. Using the "More or Less Special Characteristics" on the handout (below, numbered from 1 to 4), they were to describe to others in the group what they imagined in a way to emphasize that characteristic of qualitative study.

MORE OR LESS SPECIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE STUDY

Defining Characteristics

1. It is holistic:
 - its contextuality is well developed;
 - it is case oriented (a case is seen to be a bounded system);
 - it resists reductionism and elementalism; and
 - it is relatively noncomparative, seeking to understand its object more than to understand how it differs from others.
2. It is empirical:
 - it is field oriented;
 - its emphasis is on observables, including the observations by informants;
 - it strives to be naturalistic, noninterventionistic; and
 - there is a relative preference for natural language description, sometimes disdaining grand constructs.
3. It is interpretive:
 - its researchers rely more on intuition, with many important criteria not specified;
 - its on-site observers work to keep attention free to recognize problem-relevant events; and
 - it is attuned to the fact that research is a researcher-subject interaction.

4. It is empathic:
it attends to actor intentionality;
it seeks actor frames of reference, value commitments;
although planned, its design is emergent, responsive;
its issues are emic issues, progressively focused; and
its reporting provides vicarious experience.

Characteristics of Good Qualitative Study (in addition to the above)

1. Its observations and immediate interpretations are validated:
triangulation of data is routine;
there is deliberate effort to disconfirm own interpretations;
its reports assist readers to make their own interpretations; and
its reports assist readers in recognition of subjectivity.
2. It is nonhortatory, resisting the exploitation of the specialist's platform.
3. It is sensitive to the risks of human subjects research.
4. Its researchers are not just methodologically competent and versed in some substantive discipline but versed in the relevant disciplines.

Qualitative Studies Vary Depending on These Options

1. Aimed at knowledge production versus practice/policy assistance.
2. Seeks to represent typical cases versus what may best yield understanding.
3. Honors multiple realities (relativism) versus single view.
4. Reporting provides formal generalizations versus vicarious experience.
5. Intends to provide value conclusions versus facilitating value debate.