

# Qualitative Research for Education

## An Introduction To Theories and Models

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Outline of Chapter 1 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

### **The two major types of Qualitative Research are...**

a. **participant observation**- fieldwork/naturalist. Data is gathered in a natural environment which engages natural behavior.

b. **in-depth interviewing**- Open ended questions are used in order to get as many details as possible. Open ended questions allow for the informants to answer from their own frame of reference rather than being confined by the structure of pre-arranged questions. Informants express their thoughts more freely.

### **5 Features of Qualitative Research**

a. **Naturalistic**- when researchers go to a particular setting with either pad and pencil, or video/audio recording equipment. Researchers feel that action can be understood when it is observed in the setting in which it occurs.

\* Qualitative Researchers want to know where, when, how and under what circumstances behavior comes into being. What historical circumstances and movements are they a part of? Each act, word and gesture is significant in the eyes of the qualitative researcher.

b. **Descriptive data**-the data in qualitative research takes the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. Often the descriptive data contains quotations said by informants to illustrate and substantiate the presenting findings.

Data can include; transcripts, field notes, photographs, video recordings, audio recordings, personal documents and memos. Qualitative research does not reduce the pages of narration into numbers like quantitative researchers.

Nothing is taken for granted or overlooked for a qualitative researcher. They notice gestures, jokes, tone of voice, verbiage, decor, style of dress, response time body language and a multitude of other details of their studies. These details help to enrich the data.

**c. Concern with process-** Qualitative researchers are concerned with process rather than simple outcomes. For qualitative researchers in education, the process has been beneficial in clarifying the "self-fulfilling prophecy".

The idea that students' cognitive performance is affected by teachers' expectations of them (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Qualitative researchers have shown how these expectations translate into daily activities, procedures and interactions.

**d. Inductive-** Qualitative researchers analyze their data inductively. They do not set out to find data to prove or disprove hypotheses that they have prior to their study.

Their theories come from the "bottom up" rather than the "top down". The qualitative researchers' theory is grounded in the data. The theory emerges as a piece of art that is yet to be created, rather than a puzzle where the image is already known.

Things are more open at the beginning and more directed and specific at the bottom. It is in the first part of the qualitative research where the qualitative researcher discovers the important questions. He/she does not assume to know the important questions prior to beginning their research.

**e. Meaning-** Participant perspective (Erickson, 1986), focus questions as...what assumptions do people make about their lives? What do they take for granted? Researchers can show their data in the form of transcripts and recorded material to their informants to make sure their interpretations of what the informants said/did is accurate/true. Some controversy exists over this practice. The interplay between researcher and informant can become a major component of qualitative research.

**Fieldwork-** often done in the areas of sociology and anthropology but was first done in the United States educational research by Margaret Mead. She was concerned with the school as an organization, the role the teacher and the fast changing educational environment.

She categorized the little red school house, the city school and the academy. She argued that in order for teachers to become better teachers

they needed to study and observe the changing contexts of their students' socialization and upbringings. This type of educational research that incorporated anthropology became known as Chicago Sociology (Douglas, 1976).

**The Chicago School-** a group of sociological researchers at the University of Chicago in the 1920s-1930s. They saw symbols and personalities emerging from social interaction. They emphasized city life and the community of individuals being studied. This was considered the "scientific mosaic" that greatly influences their informants.

Chicago school sociologists saw the importance in seeing the world from the perspective of those in society that were rarely listened to, such as; the criminal, the vagrant, the immigrant and others pushed into the margins of society.

In 1932 Willard Waller began qualitative research by in-depth interviews, life histories, participant observations, case studies/records, diaries, letters and other personal documents. Anything that described the social world of teachers and their students were used as data. Before Waller, educational research was quantitative in nature. Waller believed that children and teachers were human beings tied together in a complex maze of social interactions. His goal was to help teachers develop insight into the social realities of school life.

**European connections and Social Survey Movement-**In the late 1800s Frenchman **Frederick LePlay** studied working class families using the observation method of study. He lived with them and participated in the work, play, church and school aspects of their lives and later wrote **Les Ouvriers European**, Vol. 1 was published in 1879, which described in detail the life of the working class family in Europe.

**Henry Mayhew's London Labor and the London Poor**, 1851-1862 Vol. 1-4, reported the conditions of workers and the unemployed. They were represented through life histories and extensive in-depth interviews.

**Charles Booth** was a statistician who conducted social surveys of the poor in London. His research began in 1886 and lasted for 17 years. He lived anonymously among the people he surveyed. His goal was to have a first hand experience of the lives of his subjects.

One of the most well known surveys of this era was the **Pittsburgh Survey**. Researchers during this time were focusing on social concerns of education, human services, poverty, social welfare and urban life.

The first survey to be published in 1899 as **The Philadelphia Negro**. It was an 18 month study of over 40 thousand African Americans living in Philadelphia. The Pittsburgh Survey presented statistics from industrial accidents, weekly income, types of "water closets", and school attendance. It also had detailed descriptions of interviews, portraits (sketched by artists) and photographs. Details ranged from educational planning to problems "duller" children encounter in school.

### **Ideological and Political Practices**

Qualitative research reflects particular relationships to how power is distributed in society. Questions like...Who studied? Who studies? What research gets funded? How do funding patterns shift? What kinds of things carry social interest? What strategies do researchers use to develop interest in particular areas.

In the U.S. qualitative research has been said to be useful to people excluded from the mainstream. Minority groups have been attracted to qualitative research because of the ease in which qualitative research can describe the many complexities that exist in society.

### **Ideologies and Social Change**

During the depression in the United states, many researchers to the qualitative approach to thoroughly document the severe nature and extent of the problem. Writers that needed work during this time turned to qualitative research to write about the life histories of black and white workers during this period. The history of slavery was also written about through qualitative methods of interviews with former slaves. These interviews were published in a book titled **The Disinherited Speaks: Letters From Sharecroppers**.

Photographers began photographing dimensions of the suffering of many Americans during The Depression. When these photographers wrote about their work, they described how establishing rapport (through interviews) with those that they photographed was paramount in capturing the essence of their struggles.

The power relationship of gender was also expressed by qualitative researchers of the 1940s, which later helped to empower the feminist movement of the 1970s.

**Maria Komarovsky** completed a study of women in higher education. She conducted 80 in-depth interviews with women at Barnard College. She studied how cultural values intersected with women's sex role attitudes,

noting the difficulty women described in being both "feminine" and "successful" (Komarovsky, 1946).

During the 1960s many qualitative researchers focused on educational problems. For the first time, qualitative researchers received government funding. Federal programs, recognizing how little we knew about schooling different groups of children, funded some research of those issues. This type of research was labeled **Ethnographic**. The audience for educational research grew during the 1960s. The political climate of the 60s of change made qualitative research extremely powerful for representing the powerless and excluded. The views of individuals in education that felt "less powerful" were expressed through qualitative research.

During the 1970s, ideological conflicts emerged within qualitative research. researchers who belonged to the cooperative model believed they should be as truthful as possible with their informants. They came from the Chicago School of thought. While researchers from the conflictual approach assumed that many of their informants not be honest and overt researchers would obtain less information. Therefore, being less honest would be more effective in gathering accurate information.

Another stylistic difference was that of **ethnomethodologists**, that studied how people negotiated the daily routine of their lives. This method was less concerned with the informant's feelings about the routines. Some other ideological strands include; **feminism, post modernism, critical race theory and critical theory**.

**Feminism**-focused on women and gender roles.

**Post modernism**-argues ideas represented by modernism, such as; human progress through rationalism and science, the rise of the nuclear age, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, the global threats to the environment all do NOT represent progress in the eyes of the post modernistic researchers.

**Critical Race Theory**- rather than seeing racism as an aberration, as more traditionalists do, it understands racism as a normal part of American life. Through storytelling, previously marginalized people could narrate their own personal stories and expand upon the "normal" stories of Americans. Critical race Theory has contributed to research of urban schools and the experience of African American students.

**Critical Theory**-believes that research is an ethical and political act (Roman & Apple), 1990) that always benefits a certain group. Critical theorists would

rather have benefits for those that are seen as marginalized in society. They believe that the current way that society is set up is unjust. They argue that research should empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices (McClaren, 1994). Critical Theorists are very interested in issues of gender, race and class because they consider these the prime means for differentiating power in this society.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

**Theory/paradigms-**a loose collection of related assumptions or concepts that orient thinking or research.

**Phenomenological Approach-**attempts to understand the meaning of events to ordinary people in particular situations. Assumptions about what their informants mean or how they interpret their experiences is not done by the phenomenological researcher. "Their inquiry begins in silence" (Psathas, 1973). Phenomenological researchers believe that it is possible to interpret events in many different ways, depending upon the "frame of reference". They also believe that the term "reality" is a socially constructed one.

**Symbolic Interaction-** is compatible with the phenomenological approach to research. The meaning that individuals give to their experiences and their process of interpretation are essential, not accidental or secondary to the experience itself. People interpret things from their past, writings, families, tv, personalities, work and play. It is in the interaction with these combined influences is where an individual constructs meaning.

A teacher in a school may see lunchtime as the proper time to eat, what to eat, where to eat very differently than the student sees lunchtime. Lunchtime for a student can be a break from work, an annoying intrusion, a time to diet, a time to socialize, or a chance to copy someone's notes, answers to homework or exam. It depends upon the meaning that the individual has given to the word "lunchtime". It can vary from day to day or moment to moment. All can be valid depending upon the interpretation. The qualitative researcher does NOT attempt to come to a consensus or seek to find a "real" definition but rather, they embrace the ambiguity of the diverse meanings and seek to study each one and how they can simultaneously exist.

## **Culture**

**Ethnography-** is the attempt to describe a culture. a culture is acquired knowledge used to interpret experiences and generated behavior. Some universal ways in which researchers describe culture is by looking at what

they know, what they make, observe verbal and non-verbal language and shared meaning of experiences.

The concept that acquired knowledge and symbolic interaction are somewhat related. However, for symbolic interactionists, meaning has more to do with the particular situation at the moment than a collection of cultural responses.

**Ethnomethodology**-refers to the method that people use to create and understand their daily lives. The way in which they go about seeing, explaining and describing order in the world they live.

Phrases often used in Ethnomethodology are "**common sense understanding**", "**everyday life**", "**practical accomplishments**", "**routine grounds for social action and accounts**". Interest in this type of research fell off in the 1980s.

Most qualitative researchers who identify as **feminists, critical theorists and post modernists reject the idea that the world is "directly knowable"**. The reason being... the influence of power upon different social relations. These qualitative researchers also feel that all research is informed by some theoretical understanding of human and social behavior. Therefore, it is not able to be fully inductive. All researchers have their own ideas about race, gender, religion etc. before they even enter into any type of research. Their own life experiences influences the research.

**Methods**-are the techniques used for research.

Surveys, interview, observation and case study are all different methods.

### **Some Questions About Qualitative Research.**

#### **1. A qualitative findings generalizable?**

The assumption is that human behavior is not random or idiosyncratic. Qualitative researchers' concerns are not whether or not their findings are generalizable, but rather, to which other setting and subject are the findings generalizable to?

#### **2. What about researchers opinion, prejudices and other biases and their effect on the data?**

It is important to remember that most opinions and prejudices are superficial. The data collected in qualitative research is thick, rich and deep, which often override the preconceived attitudes of the researcher. Researchers are concerned with controlling their biases as long as they are not immobilized by them! The idea is NOT to be a "clean slate", but rather,

more reflective and conscious of how "who you are" may shape and enrich what you study. Subjectivity is an important aspect to feminists or critical theorists because their viewpoint can be an entry into the data.

**3. Doesn't the presence of the researcher change the behavior of the people he/she is studying?**

**Yes...**it's called the **Researcher Effect** or the **Heisenberg Effect**.

**4. Will two researchers independently studying the same setting or subjects come up with the same findings?**

This refers to **reliability** and in educational qualitative research, there may be different human aspects being observed. researchers may collect different types of data which focus on different human aspects. Therefore, the results/findings can indeed differ!

**5. How do qualitative researchers differ from other people such as; teachers, reporters or artists?**

Researchers are different because they are trained to use sets of procedures and data analyzing techniques that are not used in any other profession. also, the researcher is well grounded in theory and research findings.

**6. Can qualitative and quantitative be used together?**

yes, but this can be challenging because hybrid research may not always meet the criteria for "good research" in either approach.

**7. Is qualitative research really scientific?**

Scientific research involves rigorous and systematical empirical inquiry that is data based. Qualitative research does meet these requirements!

**8. What is the goal of qualitative research?**

Some researchers are actually looking for grounded theory, others...description, better understanding of human behavior and experience. Some seek to empower and change. There are a variety of reasons for qualitative research.

**9. How does qualitative differ from quantitative?**

See Fig.1.1

**10. Which research approach is better?**

It depends upon what you are looking for. There are certain questions and topics that the qualitative approach will not help you with and vice versa for quantitative.



## **Ethics**

- 1. Avoid research sites where informants may feel coerced to participate in the research.**
- 2. Honor your informants' privacy.**
- 3. There is a difference in informant's time commitment to you when you do participant observation in a public place and when they do an interview with you. Always let your participants know what is expected of them and what they can expect of you and the process.**
- 4. Unless otherwise agreed to, the informant's identity should be protected so that the information that you collect does not embarrass or in other ways harm them.**
- 5. Treat informants with respect and seek cooperation with them throughout the research process.**
- 6. In negotiating permission to do a study, you should make the terms of the agreement clear. The agreement goes both ways and all parties should abide by the contract.**
- 7. Tell the truth when you write up and report your findings.**

**FIGURE 1.1** *Characteristics of Qualitative and Quantitative Research*

<i>Qualitative</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>
<i>Terms/Phrases Associated with the Approach</i>	
ethnographic	experimental
documentary	hard data
fieldwork	outer perspective
soft data	empirical
symbolic interaction	positivist
inner perspective	social facts
naturalistic	statistical
ethnomethodological	scientific method
descriptive	
participant observation	
phenomenological	
Chicago School	
life history	
case study	
ecological	
narrative	
interpretive	
<i>Key Concepts Associated with the Approach</i>	
meaning	variable
common-sense understanding	operationalize
bracketing	reliability
definition of situation	hypothesis
everyday life	validity
negotiated order	statistically significant
understanding	replication
process	predication
for all practical purposes	
social construction	
grounded theory	
<i>Theoretical Affiliation</i>	
symbolic interaction	structural functionalism
ethnomethodology	realism, positivism
phenomenology	behaviorism
culture	logical empiricism
idealism	systems theory
<i>Academic Affiliation</i>	
sociology	psychology
history	economics
anthropology	sociology
	political science

FIGURE 1.1 Continued

<i>Qualitative</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>
<i>Goals</i>	
develop sensitizing concepts	theory testing
describe multiple realities	establishing facts
grounded theory	statistical description
develop understanding	show relationship between variables
	predication
<i>Design</i>	
evolving, flexible, general	structured, predetermined, formal, specific
hunch as to how you might proceed	detailed plan of operation
<i>Written Research Proposals</i>	
brief	extensive
speculative	detailed and specific in focus
suggests areas research may be relevant to	detailed and specific in procedures
often written after some data have been collected	thorough review of substantive literature
not extensive in substantive literature review	written prior to data collection
general statement of approach	hypotheses stated
<i>Data</i>	
descriptive	quantitative
personal documents	quantifiable coding
fieldnotes	counts, measures
photographs	operationalized variables
people's own words	statistics
official documents and other artifacts	
<i>Sample</i>	
small	large
nonrepresentative	stratified
theoretical sampling	control groups
snow ball sampling	precise
purposeful	random selection
	control of extraneous variables
<i>Techniques or Methods</i>	
observation	experiments
participant observation	survey research
reviewing various documents, etc.	structured interviewing
open-ended interviewing	quasi experiments
first person accounts	structured observation
<i>Relationship with Subjects</i>	
empathy	detachment
emphasis on trust	short-term
egalitarian	distant
subject as friend	subject-researcher
intense contact	circumscribed

(continued)