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THINKING LIKE A QUALITATIVE RESEARCHER

SKILL

Develop the skill of thinking like a qualitative researcher.

WHY THE SKILL IS IMPORTANT

Qualitative research requires that people approach research from a perspective that may be different than what they have previously learned. It requires thinking differently than the perspectives taken in quantitative research. The skill is also important because today there are many varieties of qualitative research. Some individuals take more of a philosophical approach, more of a theoretical or advocacy approach, or more of a specific focus on topics such as data analysis or validity. Ours is more of a strong methods approach in which we emphasize rigorous methods, good protocols for collection and analysis, multiple and extensive data collection, and multiple steps in data analysis. You will see our approach emerge as a structured way to conduct qualitative research (e.g., scripting the purpose statement and the use of computer software). Thus, understanding the skill is important both as you develop as a qualitative researcher and as you understand our approach to the topic.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Qualitative research is an approach to inquiry that follows the traditional ways of conducting social, behavioral, and health science research. In this **process of research**, the inquirer starts with a problem that needs to be solved and then formulates a question that if answered, will help address the problem. The question will be answered by collecting and analyzing data gathered from people who can help answer the question. Once this information is collected and analyzed, the inquirer then writes up a report of the study summarizing the findings. These conclusions are disseminated in many types of reports, such as doctoral dissertations, master's theses, journal articles, proposals for funding, and local organizational studies. This process may be familiar to many beginning researchers.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THIS RESEARCH PROCESS

We have three genres of research that follow this process of research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Not all people divide up the genres of research into these three types, but this is the way we think of them and have written about them. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches have been around a long time. In the early 20th century, scientists developed procedures for quantitative experiments and surveys and invented different ways to statistically analyze data. Also in this early period, qualitative research was born out of the writing of anthropologists and then sociologists. Although qualitative research as an approach is largely ascribed to the mid-1900s, it developed rapidly during the late 1900s and has been extensively used in the social and behavioral sciences over the past 40 years. Mixed methods research is new, beginning about 25 years ago during the late 1980s, with several writers developing the features we know today.

HOW QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS THINK

The entire idea of considering how qualitative researchers think and approach the social world they are in resulted from John's composition of a "qualitative inquiry quiz" he gave a few times to students who entered his qualitative research courses. He told them that the intent of this 30-item quiz was to determine whether they would make good qualitative researchers, and the items were intended to elicit responses to these questions. These questions helped determine if students had characteristics he often associated with qualitative research. In his answers to this quiz, he said that the qualitative researcher did the following:

- Saw the big picture
- Made connections easily
- Liked to write
- Liked to draw pictures
- Organized diffuse information into categories
- Saw unusual things in everyday detail
- Saw many perspectives about things
- Loved to explore
- Liked to tinker
- Knew how to count but liked words better

For example, one question in the quiz asked whether, if students were standing at the entrance to Rocky Mountain National Park and looking off into the distance, they saw the broad panorama of the entire series of peaks and valleys or the detail of individual trees. The qualitative researcher often seeks the "big picture" rather than focusing on individual elements (as the quantitative researcher might do). Needless to say, John did not administer this quiz often. Students were concerned that they were failing as qualitative researchers in just the first class!

Unquestionably, this quiz focused on personal orientations of qualitative researchers. But the quiz did cause John to think that there is a way that qualitative researchers might look at the social world they are in, and the first skill would be to convey some sense of what this vision might be. So John changed the entrance activity for his qualitative research courses and shifted his focus to a single picture. Basically, he wanted to understand from the students what qualitative research meant to them. We often make qualitative research much too difficult to describe when essentially it can be reduced to a few key ideas. The sign of a good thinker is the ability to conceptualize in a simple way as well as in a complex way. There is a way to describe qualitative research simply, and that is to discuss how qualitative researchers think when they approach a research topic. So, instead of a quiz, John decided to give his students a picture to look at and to describe.

THE BOAT PICTURE

John provided a picture of boats on a lake. Most people are not familiar with this picture, and he asked students to simply describe what they saw in the picture.

Furthermore, he asked them to write a short paragraph about what they saw in the picture. What they wrote tended to fall into groups of qualitative or quantitative observations. This provided an opportunity for John to explain how quantitative and qualitative researchers observe a scene.



Reaction From a Quantitative Researcher

Those who approach the picture in a more quantitative way have described in their paragraphs these features:

- They report measures such as water level or distance of the boats from shore.
- They describe the time of day on the basis of the sun's position.
- They describe the topography of the land.
- They describe the dimensions of things in the picture, such as the large hills, the small boats, and the small sticks in the water.
- They enumerate the types of colors they see, such as the oranges, the browns, and the blacks.

Reaction From a Qualitative Researcher

Other students in the class might describe the picture in more of a qualitative way—a less counting or numeric way. Perhaps these students come from the humanities, or they have

read something about qualitative research. Here are some ways these students describe the boat picture:

- They tell stories about people who were fishing during the day and are now resting at home with their families.
- They describe a hush over the lake as the boats rest for the night.
- They describe all aspects of the picture—the sun, the trees, the lake, the boats. A panorama unfolds.
- They discuss the contrasts of light and dark.
- They might create poems or songs about the lake.
- They might see themselves sitting on the shore looking at the calm boats and feeling at peace.
- They might place themselves on the boats, sitting there peacefully at sundown.
- They talk about what is not in the picture, such as people or children playing on the shore.
- They see the disturbance in the water—something unusual or unexpected.

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

What is qualitative research, and when is it the best choice for a study? Various authors have enumerated the nature of this form of research, and we would like to present what we have used over the years as the major elements of this approach. At the heart of qualitative research is, we believe, a **central phenomenon** (or topic) we wish to explore. This is the one central idea you would like to learn about or study in your project (your focus may move beyond this one idea as your project proceeds). Around this central phenomenon are arrayed several elements of the nature of qualitative research (presented in no specific order). About the central phenomenon we hope to:

Report the voices of participants. Qualitative research involves reporting how people talk about things, how they describe things, and how they see the world. This comes through in a qualitative study in terms of the quotations we see in published qualitative projects. It comes through individual perspectives. Through these quotations, we hear the voices of individuals—their personal views, their ways of talking, their takes on the situation.

You can identify the nature of a qualitative study by assessing whether it contains many of the different major elements.

Go out to the setting (or context) to collect data. Qualitative research involves going out to a setting and studying it firsthand. Thus, we are not interested only in how people talk about things; we are also interested in how their particular settings or contexts shape what they have to say. We are

interested in the boats, the hills, the sun, and the sky. The context may be their families, their friends, their homes, their work, or many other contexts in which they live, work, or interact. Context or setting is important in qualitative research.

Look at how processes unfold. In qualitative research, inquirers often study processes or what unfolds over time. These processes have steps, and one step comes before another. This study of process has a time element as well, so we need to follow what unfolds over a long period of time. A person might reflect on what happened during the day on a boat and how the boat was put to rest in the evening.

Focus in on a small number of people or sites. In qualitative research, we study a small number of people but go deep to develop the detail they provide to us. Rather than trying to apply conclusions from a small number of individuals to a large number, researchers study a small number of people who are, in and of themselves, of interest. If we studied a large number, we would lose the richness of learning from a few and lose the depth of understanding specific individuals. In the picture, we have one lake and a small number of boats.

Explore in an open-ended way. Qualitative research is exploratory research. We do not often know what questions to ask, what variables to measure, or what people to initially talk to. We are simply exploring a topic (later we will call it a central phenomenon) with some individuals (or organizations) we think will yield useful information. We are not trying to explain predetermined factors or specific relationships because they may not hold true with the people we need to learn from. We might simply want to describe what it is like to sit and look at the boats in the evening.

Develop a complex understanding. The beauty of qualitative research is that it provides a complex understanding of a problem or situation. The more facets the researcher uncovers, the better; the more unpredictable aspects that surface, the better. We hear multiple voices from many participants, gather multiple perspectives, and develop multiple themes. In short, qualitative studies represent the complexity of a situation, a complexity that does often mirror that of real life. For example, in the boat picture, the glaring sun offsets the calm of the boats—a contrast that adds complexity.

Lift up the silenced voices of marginalized groups or populations. Qualitative research works best when studying people who have not often been studied. These may be individuals from diverse cultures, socioeconomic levels, racial groups, and gender orientations. For these groups, the traditional instruments, measures, and variables do not fit because available research was developed on nonmarginalized groups of people. These groups often remain outside the mainstream of conventional research, and hence, we do not know much about them. The people who own and use the boats may be an understudied group.

Create multiple perspectives or views of the phenomenon. The best qualitative research shares information about themes drawn from **multiple perspectives**. We say, “Report the good, the bad, and the ugly.” So, qualitative research is not a “Pollyanna”

perspective of hope and gratitude. Intermixed with these ideas would be the worries, concerns, setbacks, and dilemmas that are the very fabric of our lives. When a theme is presented in a qualitative study, we hear about the many perspectives of individuals, individuals from different walks of life, age groups, geographic regions, genders, and so forth, who provide a rich mosaic of life. One theme from the boat picture might include the multiple perspectives of the transitions of daily life for individuals, from busy fishing trips to the calm of the lake at night.

Contrast different views of the phenomenon. Qualitative research gives us the opportunity to contrast what is stated (e.g., organizational goals) with what is not stated (e.g., informal goals). When we talk to people we may obtain a different perspective than when we look at the formal structure of an organization. This contrast may lead to some useful observations or useful changes for organizations. This point again speaks to contrasts—the heat of the sun and the calm of the water, the one pole left unattended in a boat by a fisherman.

Study sensitive topics. Qualitative research involves the study of emotionally charged topics that are hard to research. Because we talk directly to people and spend time in their settings, we may get them to talk about the hard issues, the problems that typically do not surface in more conventional research. Qualitative research is known for addressing **sensitive topics**, hard-to-study topics, and topics close to the problems of individuals living in this complex world. Thus, it takes a brave person to engage in qualitative research, to go out and confront individuals directly in open-ended interviews, and to wrestle with difficult topics to understand and embrace. We can see the emotions of calm, the uncertainty as to what the next day will bring, and the hope for better fishing tomorrow in the boat picture.

Reflect on our own biases and experiences. Qualitative researchers are self-conscious researchers, always reflecting on what they personally bring to a study. They realize that they bring their own cultures and backgrounds and that this shapes how they view the social world they see. Moreover, they are willing to talk about their backgrounds and their influence on their writing and their conceptualizations of their qualitative studies. This is being reflexive, or positioning themselves in their studies. They are not passive observers of the study and in the background; instead, they are in the foreground and are present in the final writing product of a study.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Now that we have talked about what qualitative research is to me, it might be helpful to review some of the misconceptions people have of qualitative research. Sometimes people characterize qualitative research by one method of data collection—“It means hanging out by the fountain and observing.” Or someone might say that qualitative research is “holding focus groups.” Instead, we view qualitative research as incorporating many methods of data collection, using multiple methods, and drawing on the strength of each

method to understand the problem at hand. Sometimes people characterize qualitative research as not rigorous or systematic—indeed, as not having a structure to the steps in the process of research. Instead, qualitative research is a science in which we collect data to answer questions. It is also empirical in that we collect data. We see qualitative research as having steps in all phases of the research process, and qualitative researchers engage in these steps with as much systematic attention as in any other form of inquiry. The chapters in this book will hopefully attest to the rigor of qualitative research.

Some people think that qualitative research is too subjective and too interpretive. They are often referring to the open-ended nature of qualitative questions, which then permits the researcher to draw together the codes or **themes** that describe the responses. True, the qualitative researcher does need to make an interpretation of the data and to form themes in the data analysis steps. But then the accuracy of this interpretation can be examined through the many validity checks the researcher could put into place. In the end, the researcher's interpretation is often checked by the participants in a study and ultimately examined by the readers of the study.

Some people think that qualitative research is too expensive and too labor intensive to carry out. True, qualitative researchers stay in the setting for long periods of time and conduct labor-intensive interviews and observations. To transcribe qualitative interviews, for instance, takes considerable time. To then analyze the transcriptions by going line for line again takes time. But the technology is now in place to help the qualitative researcher. Voice translation programs are available to use in addition to qualitative data analysis software programs. These tools will at least reduce the time required for the more labor-intensive phases of this form of research.

Summary

So the skill we are writing about in this chapter is to know how qualitative researchers think and to be able to convey the essential characteristics of qualitative research. Knowing these characteristics will enable you to define qualitative research when you need to defend your choice of research

methodology and to evaluate whether you have a good qualitative study. Knowing what characteristics you bring to qualitative research will give you confidence to engage in this form of inquiry and to assess your own personal readiness for conducting a qualitative study.

Activity

Do you now have a sense of how a qualitative researcher might think about the boat picture? One activity for follow-up would be to redraft your initial statement about the boat picture and try to incorporate as many of the characteristics of qualitative research as possible. Alternatively, you might choose another picture—something

that has a panoramic view—and describe it from a qualitative way of thinking.

When someone asks you, “What is qualitative research?” you have a list of central characteristics you could tell him or her. Alternatively, you might pull out a picture and describe how a qualitative researcher might think about it.

Further Resources

Look at the core characteristics of qualitative research. Many introductory qualitative research books include their own lists, and there are many features common from book to book. Begin by looking at these:

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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