

Qualitative Inquiry

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Second Edition

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Qualitative Inquiry

Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Based Perspectives



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Introduction to Qualitative Inquiry

This introductory chapter traces the evolution of qualitative research. It uses as a backdrop Denzin and Lincoln's (2005a; 2018) notions of the nine moments of qualitative research and provides more detail of what has happened in the last four decades, from the 1970s until the present. It highlights how, in the 1970s, educational anthropologists and sociolinguists did much to promote qualitative research in order to understand human activity in context, and make research more useful and accessible. It discusses the influence of narrative and feminist work in the 1980s that opened the doors to more storied, embodied and ethical/participatory approaches to research. This was followed closely by the shift to nontraditional and more recently called arts-based methodologies, used to counteract the hegemony inherent in traditional texts that came as a result of the postmodern movement and the search for more authentic forms of representation. Next it discusses various worldviews (Creswell, 2007; Kovach, 2018) and the typical categories of research that are outlined in most qualitative research texts. It suggests that these typologies are more about labelling and fitting work into a particular tradition and/or field, or establishing what kind of research it is, rather than matching the focus, questions, and researcher orientation to the process or how of inquiry.

An initial way for thinking about how inquiry is carried out has been suggested by Maxwell and Miller (2008). They discuss how each inquiry process is based on one or the other of

two types of relationships: those based on similarity, and those based on contiguity ... [t]he similarity-based relations involve resemblances or common features ... generally used to define categories and to group and compare data ... by category ... Contiguity-based relations ... are connections that are identified among data in an actual context. (p. 462)

Maxwell and Miller refer to the former as categorizing approaches, and the latter as connecting approaches. For example, both constant comparison and phenomenological inquiry discussed in Chapters Three and Four are predicated on categorizing approaches, while narrative inquiry discussed in Chapter Five uses

connecting approaches. Freeman (2017) builds on this work and suggests that arts-based inquiry uses poetical and dialectical approaches which are discussed in more detail below. This frame is a helpful beginning for classifying the various approaches to qualitative inquiry. But the how of inquiry, as I am defining it, extends beyond classifying the approaches based on these approaches. I argue that inquiry is the method. It is the way of being in and doing the work from its inception to its conclusion. Finally, this chapter continues with an overview of the evolution of qualitative inquiry, and a section where I position myself as a researcher.

Evolution of qualitative inquiry

Sexton (1997), as outlined in Raskin (2002, p. 2), has divided the history of humankind into three eras: the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern. The premodern from the 6th century BC through the Middle Ages emphasized the mind/body dualism of reality where faith and religion played central roles. In the modern era, from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century and beyond, empiricism, positivism, and scientific methodology were stressed, as well as the belief in objective truths. In fact, 'scientific knowledge was assumed to be a mirror image of objective reality' (Sexton, 1997, p. 7). Finally, the postmodern era represents the thinking that evolved through the second half of the 20th century until now. It emphasizes the creation, rather than the discovery of social and personal realities, and 'highlights human participation in the construction of reality' (Raskin, 2002, p. 2).

Denzin and Lincoln (2005a; 2018) have mapped out a series of what they call 'nine moments' in qualitative research that correspond to Sexton's description of the latter modern era and its transition to the postmodern way of thinking.

- The first of these was the 'traditional phase' (1900–1942), where work was presented as objective, but actually was colonizing depictions of reality that led to misunderstandings about other people and their cultures.
- The second was the 'modernist phase' (1940–1970s), where qualitative researchers attempted to develop their work in ways that matched the rigour of quantitative research.
- Third was the 'blurred genres phase' (1970–1986), during which time researchers experimented with narrative ways of doing and knowing and attended to relational aspects of research.
- The fourth phase was the 'crisis of representation' (mid-1980s–1990) that emphasized how all phases of the research process are a series of constructions made and interpreted by the researcher and called for the researcher to situate himself/herself reflexively in the work.

- Fifth was the 'postmodern phase' (1990–1995), where researchers engaged in what was then considered experimental forms of writing and participatory inquiry.
- Sixth was the 'post-experimental phase' (1995–2000), during which time new arts-based ways were used to study and portray lived experience.
- Seventh was the 'methodologically contested phase' (2000–2004), where methods were being questioned.
- The eighth moment they called 'the fractured future' (2005–2017), marking a time when qualitative inquiry has had to confront conservative measures attempting to rein in qualitative inquiry and align it more closely with positivistic orientations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, pp. 14–20).
- The ninth moment (2017–) is

a 'punctuation point' ... not a period, not the end of the page. While keeping our eyes on issues of social justice, we must also contrive how to represent multiple findings from multiple studies in order to achieve presence and voice at the policy table ... to talk with those who speak quantitatively and ... qualitatively, but to do so with consonance, coherence and suasion ... and make transparent the changes that are overtaking the world, so that we understand the futures we have chosen and are empowered to choose others if we so wish ... we are in fact at the edge of a new colonialism, a new era, one that we did not fully choose, and one that we must begin to understand more fully than we have to this point. (p. 927)

By using these phases as broad brushstrokes and a backdrop for how qualitative inquiry has evolved, it can be seen that it has a substantial history. This will be spelled out more specifically in subsequent chapters. For the moment, I return in more detail to the five most recent decades in qualitative inquiry. In the 1970s, a major shift took place when cognitive psychologists discovered in the translated works of Vygotsky, the social, constructivist, and contextual nature of language. Sociolinguists saw the need to study language from a pragmatic or functional perspective, while theorists began to question the existence of an objective reality. The nature of interaction, the importance of context, and the need to understand interaction as a process rather than a product, forced researchers to turn to qualitative approaches to conduct their work.

Borrowing from naturalistic studies of anthropology and sociology, and the subjective, lived-experience orientation of phenomenology, researchers produced micro-ethnographies, ethno-methodologies, and phenomenological studies that used natural and everyday contexts to get rich and deep understandings of the particular. The work of narrative and feminist inquirers in the 1980s pushed further the boundaries of this evolving work. Their efforts highlighted the fact that narrative is a legitimate and natural way of doing and knowing. The relational nature of their work brought ethical issues around equity, voice, and reflexivity to

the forefront, while the challenges of postmodern critiques emanating from critical and race theory continued to contest the thinking about the nature of reality and the need to examine the local as a political site where inequities exist that can be confronted and changed with action.

By the 1990s, and after a long, hard struggle, qualitative inquiry began to receive acceptance as a legitimate form of research. Within qualitative inquiry, however, researchers were questioning the linear and hegemonic practices inherent in traditional texts and began to experiment with artful forms and processes in their research. They wanted their work to be more embodied and capable of evoking intellectual, aesthetic, and affective responses and to reach wider audiences and ignite social action and change. The increasing visual world we live in and the advances in technology have provided support and opportunities for pushing the boundaries even more. Since the turn of the 21st century, arts-based work has continued to increase and flourish. While by no means universally accepted (Silverman, 2007), arts-based inquiry has gained prominence around the globe and has sparked important, ongoing, and necessary conversations about how to develop and assess rigour in this type of work.

The future for qualitative inquiry holds much promise; it will not disappear. But there are concerns about the backlash associated with the ‘evidence-based’ research movement that is taking place. It puts pressure on qualitative researchers to adopt a more ‘quantitative’ methodology or ‘mixed methods’ to make qualitative inquiry ‘less anecdotal’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 927) and to ‘improve’ the quality and robustness of the work (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006, p. xvii). Discussions about quality and how to evaluate qualitative inquiry, and ways to deal with the backlash, will be issues confronting qualitative inquirers for the remainder of this decade and beyond.

Worldviews and categories of inquiry

Guba (1990, p. 17), cited in Creswell (2007), defines a paradigm or worldview as ‘a basic set of beliefs that guide action’. Furthermore, Creswell (2007) states that there are four worldviews: post-positivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. He suggests that worldviews ‘used by qualitative researchers vary with the set of beliefs they bring to research’ (p. 19), and that researchers often mix worldviews if they are compatible with each other. Kovach (2018) would argue that there is another, Indigenous worldview that is different from the ‘Western gaze’ inherent in the worldviews mentioned above and one from which qualitative researchers can learn. The basic tenets of this worldview are that

- Knowledge is holistic and implies empirical, experiential, sensory and metaphysical possibilities.
- Knowledge arises from interconnectivity and interdependency.
- Knowledge is animate and fluid.
- Knowledge arises from a multiplicity of sources, including nonhuman sources. (p. 218)

Post-positivism has a scientific and reductionist approach aiming for cause-and-effect findings from empirical data. Post-positivist researchers align themselves closely to clearly delineated research steps and the products/reports of quantitative researchers.

Social constructivism is predicated on the idea that lived experience is socially constructed, understood in context, and influenced by the historical and cultural experiences known to individuals.

Social constructivist researchers situate themselves in their work, use open-ended questions and emergent analysis, and develop close relationships with participants in order to explain in great detail the particular experience or phenomenon under study. The advocacy/participatory worldview focuses on making changes for marginalized groups and creating spaces so these voices can be heard. In certain work, the participants take part in delineating the focus of the research and work actively with the researchers throughout the process.

Researchers coming from a worldview of pragmatism are most interested in the ‘actions, situations and consequences of inquiry ... and will emphasize the importance of conducting research that best addresses the research problem’ (Creswell, 2007, pp. 22–23) and by using the best available approaches.

Researchers who embrace an Indigenous worldview focus on ‘relationship with community’, ethical protocols that ‘communicate an indigenous belief system’, ‘storying as a research method’, and research portrayals that are ‘holistic, inclusive, and respectful of the experiential and embodied nature of being that finds expression in written, visual, and performative representational forms’ (Kovach, 2018, pp. 223–227). I believe there are important things to be learned from Indigenous methodologies and synergetic possibilities with qualitative inquiry which embraces a way of being in the work as discussed below.

Creswell (2007) also suggests that at a less philosophical level there are interpretive communities or, as Bentz and Shapiro (1998) call them, ‘cultures of inquiry’. They draw on postmodern, feminist, critical and critical race, queer, and disability theories to inform their work. Creswell posits that there are five basic approaches to inquiry: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study and provides some descriptions and discussions of each too lengthy to summarize here.

Other authors have similar classifications for qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Munhall & Oiler, 1986; Strauss &

Corbin, 1990; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006). These typologies tend to use overlapping terminology and mix the ‘what and the how’. They can be confusing because the terms used in the approaches frequently vary when they are, in fact, referring to the same thing.

This book takes a different approach for mapping out the terrain of qualitative inquiry. It focuses on acknowledging the perspective of the researcher and the form of inquiry based on a typology discussed below and embraces an ethical and relational stance throughout the research process. As noted above, the inquiry is considered the method, not separate from it. Moreover, it is predicated on the kinds of inquiry that are emergent in nature, ones where researchers do not begin their work with a specific theoretical lens as critical theorists might do. Rather, the researcher accounts for his/her researcher perspective and monitors this clearly and transparently throughout the work, allowing understandings to emerge. Then (a) particular lens(es) may be used to interpret the work further (Butler-Kisber, 2001), and to suggest possibilities for action and change.

Establishing a researcher perspective is not a clear-cut exercise because, ‘rather than having one fixed version of who we are, we all move between multiple identities’ (Silverman, 2007, pp. 1–2). That being said, it is useful to try to sort out the ontological perspectives (beliefs about the nature of being/reality) and qualitative inquiry epistemological perspectives (beliefs about how knowledge is acquired), that researchers bring to their work. A helpful way of doing this is to think of a qualitative inquiry continuum, as shown in Figure 1.1.

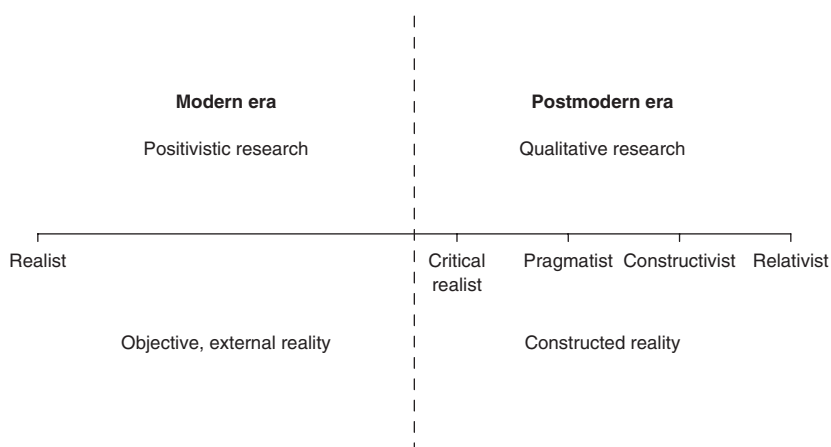


Figure 1.1 Qualitative inquiry continuum

On the far left represents a realist perspective, one that is predicated on the idea that an external reality exists independent of beliefs or understanding. In other words, there is a clear difference between beliefs about the world and the way the world is. Inquiry done by researchers holding a realist or positivist perspective is predicated on the ideas that it is 'possible to conduct objective and value free inquiry, observations are the final arbiter in theoretical disputes' and 'the methods of the natural sciences ... are appropriate for the study of social phenomena because human behaviour is governed by law-like regularities' (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 16).

On the far right, or other end of the continuum, is the relativist perspective, or the belief that reality is known only through socially constructed meanings. There is no single shared reality, just a variety of social constructions.

From the midpoint of this continuum to the far left would represent, for the most part, the modern era of thinking described above. From the midpoint to the right would represent, again with a qualified 'for the most part', the postmodern or interpretivist/post-positivist era of thinking during which time qualitative inquiry evolved and began to flourish. Inquiry done from this perspective is predicated on the ideas that

the researcher and the social world impact on each other, facts and values are not distinct and findings are inevitably influenced by the researcher's perspective and values ... [and] the methods of natural science are not appropriate because the social world is not governed by law-like regularities but is mediated through meaning and human agency. (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 17)

A useful exercise would be to juxtapose this qualitative inquiry continuum with the nested conceptualization of Indigenous methodologies outlined by Kovach (2018, p. 229).

It should be noted that from hereon I avoid the term 'interpretivist' inquiry because of the uneven and inconsistent way that it is used in the literature as an umbrella term for many different ways of discussing qualitative inquiry. Also, I avoid the term 'post-positivist' inquiry because this term is defined as a binary opposition of positivism, as what it is not, rather what it is – a completely different orientation to research. The ontological perspectives that are situated from the midpoint to the right of this continuum represent the postmodern era of thinking.

These perspectives, that of critical realists, pragmatists, and constructivists, have been classified in many different ways, using varying terms, and overlap considerably. For the purposes of a brief overview, I have decided to discuss these three general stances. It should be noted that all three share the common beliefs about qualitative inquiry described above that drive much of the current, emergent-oriented qualitative work, but also each of them has some basic differences.

Critical realists retain ‘an ontological realism while accepting a form of epistemological constructivism and relativism’ (Maxwell, 2008, p. 165) because they accept the ‘possibility of alternative valid accounts of any phenomenon’ and that ‘all theories of the world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and world view, and all knowledge is partial, incomplete, and fallible’ (Maxwell, 2008, p. 164). They do not shy away from making judgements about the merit of various theories about the world. Critical realists are comfortable drawing causal conclusions about human behaviour that emerge from inquiry derived preferably from observational work (Silverman, 2007). Critics suggest that, ‘while critical realism contests some of the default assumptions of empiricism and realism which treat social systems as closed systems, it is still predicated on an inherent order of things that is graspable by research’ (Mir & Watson, 2001, p. 1169). Critics are wary of this epistemologically conservative stance that ‘provides a very stable consensus about a knowledge base for social science inquiry’ (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, p. 44).

The key feature of the pragmatist perspective emanating from the work of John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead, among others, is that ontology and epistemology are conflated. There is no gap between knowledge and everyday action. Knowing is in the doing/experiencing, truth is the equivalent to whatever is known at a particular time, and social knowledge is cumulative and provides the basis for the evolution of thought and society (Munhall, 2007, p. 4). Thus, knowledge is both temporal and continuous as one experience grows out of another. Ordinary, everyday experience is valued, but can never be fully represented. Representations are, therefore, necessarily selective, and the challenge is to use knowledge in ethical ways to ‘enhance human experience’ (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007, pp. 40–42). Critics of the pragmatist perspective find this emphasis that always starts from individual and local experiences, to be a slow and cumbersome way to enact social action and change.

The ontological stance of constructivists, born out of the work of Gregory Bateson, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, among others, is that reality is socially constructed/created through social practices, interaction, and experiences. Therefore, all constructed meanings represent a particular point of view. There is no such thing as a single reality. The constructivist epistemological stance accepts that there are multiple ways of understanding/knowing the world, which are always constituted and contextually dependent. The perspective of the observer and the object of observation are inseparable; the nature of meaning is relative; phenomena are context-based; and the process of knowledge and understanding is social, inductive, hermeneutical, and qualitative (Sexton, 1997, p. 8)

Both the critical realist and pragmatist perspectives share much in common with constructivism. There has been less and less criticism of constructivist perspectives as qualitative inquiry gained legitimacy. The main argument

against constructivist views are that when taken to extreme, there is an inherent relativism and inability to act and/or improve resulting from the belief that all meaning is constructed. What is probably most important to remember when talking about qualitative inquiry and researcher perspectives is that ‘any given qualitative researcher ... can be more than one thing at the same time, can be fitted into both the tender and tough minded categories’ (Denzin, 1998, p. 338). It is the way researcher perspectives are explained and made transparent that is most important.

Organization of the book

The organization of this book is based on a form of typology that I have devised in order to categorize the different kinds of qualitative inquiry. I have used a pragmatist lens to do so because I have focused on inquiry as a holistic process, not just an approach or a method. I have moved away from some of the historical typologies which use varying criteria that mix the notion of what kind of inquiry a study is with how the inquiry is done. I contend that this muddies the waters for researchers looking for direction and a way of ‘being’ in their work.

I am suggesting that the term ‘qualitative inquiry’ is the operative or umbrella term for all kinds of inquiry that utilize interpretation. It is based on a single case/context and a particular situation, or involves a small number of participants, and is predicated on narrative ways of doing, thinking, and understanding. The term ‘qualitative inquiry’ works against the age-old, qualitative/quantitative dichotomy, and the concern expressed by Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006) that currently ‘qualitative research’ is frequently being used to ‘refer not to the traditions of meaning-focused or lived experience-focused research, but to small “n” studies that apply large “n” tools ... following methodologically positivist approaches’ (pp. xvi–xvii), as well as to the evidence-based research mentioned above.

I am proposing a different typology for classifying qualitative inquiry (see Table 1.1), namely that qualitative work can be subdivided into three basic types of inquiry: thematic, narrative, and arts-based. All three emphasize holistic inquiry processes, and a way of being in the research, not just a certain method or series of analytic steps. Each does these in different ways and may be informed by different research traditions and those of practices which are not mutually exclusive.

Thematic inquiry uses a categorization approach (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) for interpretation that produces a series of themes that emerge in the process of the research and account for experiences across groups or situations. Narrative inquiry uses a number of connecting approaches (Maxwell & Miller, 2008; Reissman, 2008) to produce a contextualized, contiguous interpretation and

storied account of the particular situation(s). Arts-based inquiry uses a poetical approach, a 'reach beyond a search for meaning into the sensual and afferent and difficult-to-grasp or put into words, experiential world' (Freeman, 2017, p. 73) and dialectical approaches which are 'inherently critical because they must bring together differing or opposing perspectives or forces ... to construct something new' (p. 54) by using different art forms to analyse/interpret/portray aspects of the particular study.

All three types of inquiry can be informed by any one, or more than one, of the ontological and epistemological stances outlined above, and can be carried out with participants in more or less participatory ways, or can have a more inward and autobiographical or self-study focus. It should be emphasized that there is no perfect, one-to-one match suggested. It behooves the researcher to try to make his/her stance clear, and to use the knowledge about different perspectives to interrogate the inquiry process in transparent and reflexive ways.

Table 1.1 Qualitative typology

Perspectives	Analytical approaches	Research traditions/practices
Thematic	Categorizing	Ethnographic Phenomenological Case Study Grounded Theory Action Research
Narrative	Connecting	Feminist Critical Theory Indigenous Oral History Biographical Autobiographical Participatory Action Research
Arts-based	Poetical Dialectical	Feminist Critical Theory Indigenous Artistic Poetic Performative Participatory Action Research

Positioning myself in the work

In my research, I have used (and am using) all three types of qualitative inquiry thematic, narrative, and arts-based, depending on the focus of the research and

who the audience happens to be (Butler-Kisber, 1988; 2002; 2005a; 2005b; 2007; 2008b; 2016; Butler-Kisber & Stewart, 2009; Kerwin-Boudreau & Butler-Kisber, 2016a). Please note that I have purposely chosen in this edition to use the term ‘arts-based’, rather than ‘arts-informed’ inquiry that I used in the first edition. ‘Arts-based’ inquiry was coined by Elliot Eisner at Stanford University in the early 1990s. He opened the doors to this kind of research and it has flourished in the last two decades largely through his efforts.

Subsequently, the term ‘arts-informed’ was introduced by Gary Knowles and Ardra Cole at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Their preference for the term arts-informed stemmed from the fact that as educational researchers they were using art to inform their research, rather than basing it on art. I felt that arts-informed was more applicable to the work that I do. However, in the last seven years I have come to realize that arts-based is the term used most frequently worldwide and as a result, to lessen confusion and for search purposes, ‘arts-based’ is more helpful and efficient.

Also, I am influenced in the ways mentioned above by critical realist, pragmatist, constructivist, and Indigenous perspectives, depending on the inquiry in which I am involved. For example, I draw a particular salience from the work of critical realists and their penchant for finding the ‘remarkable in the mundane’ and the ‘mundane in the remarkable’ (Silverman, 2007, pp. 16–18), their imperative to listen and observe things anew through attention to detail and self-conscious reflection. From the pragmatist and Indigenous perspectives, I am heavily influenced by the notion that knowledge is experience and based on storying, a way of knowing that includes all aspects of what is fundamentally a relational and holistic process that takes place over time. It involves not just the approach to interpretation, or a series of methodological steps, but is the overall way of being in and doing the research. What I draw particularly from the constructivist perspective comes from the Vygotskian (1978) notion that the tool/language or the form mediates understandings in different and potentially interesting ways. This opens the doors to artful forms of inquiry where different mediums reveal different interpretations and possibilities. Furthermore, my work is guided by feminist and postmodern notions with a view to social justice, action, and social change.

I was fortunate to have been taught and/or mentored by a number of outstanding scholars. In the early years in my doctoral work I was taught by sociolinguist Courtney Cazden and anthropologist Karen Watson-Gegeo who provided me with a wonderful foundation in thematic inquiry illustrated in the educational ethnography and classroom discourse analysis of the 1970s and 1980s. Later, I was introduced to multiple approaches to qualitative inquiry in courses with Joseph Maxwell and Michael Huberman. It was Michael who introduced me to the work of Laurel Richardson and provided me with my first taste of poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2002; 2016c). Subsequently, I was privileged

to have been enticed, encouraged, and guided in narrative and arts-based inquiry by Jean Clandinin, Elliot Eisner, and Tom Barone. My interest and stances in what I am classifying as thematic, narrative, and arts-based perspectives have been influenced extensively by the work of these innovative scholars. Finally, my teaching and supervision have had, and continue to have, a significant impact on how I think about and conduct qualitative inquiry. Students over many years and from varying disciplines have helped me to question more fully and probe more deeply, and have acted as an inspiration and a sounding board for exploring and reflecting upon new avenues and possibilities in qualitative inquiry. I am indebted to all of them.