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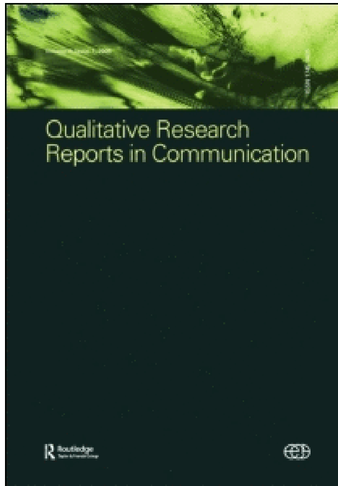

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What Is Qualitative Research?

Ronald L. Jackson II, Darlene K. Drummond, & Sakile Camara

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The defining nature and characteristics of qualitative research are surveyed in this article, which identifies key distinctions between method and methodology. The authors note that qualitative research is primarily concerned understanding human beings' experiences in a humanistic, interpretive approach. Issues of research design differences between quantitative and qualitative research are traced with an emphasis on identifying diverse methodologies, including those focusing on analysis of text, and diverse forms of data collection along with criteria for evaluating qualitative research.

Keywords: Data Collection; Ethnography; Methodologies; Methods; Phenomenology

The function of all science is to investigate answers to questions about the evolution of an experience or phenomenon via observation. Social science specifically attempts to discover new or different ways of understanding the changing nature of lived social realities. In trying to grapple with what life means to human beings, social scientists presume there is a systematic way of apprehending critical dimensions to problems that confront our social world. In this pursuit, even the most optimistic scholar knows that he or she can only uncover what is available or accessible at the time of the investigation or the period(s) leading up to the point of inquiry. It is impossible to grasp every aspect of a social phenomenon, investigation, or question. Nonetheless, it is the responsibility of every researcher to approach each study with as much *objectivity, ethical diligence*, and *rigor* as possible.

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The approach to ensuring *objectivity, ethical diligence*, and *rigor* depends on whether the study is qualitative or quantitative. For years, scholars have argued that the principal distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is that they do not share the same epistemology. Rather than elaborate on this line of thinking, it is far better to understand that key distinctions between the two can be found within both method and methodology. Method refers to *how* data is collected, and methodology refers to the identification and utilization of the best approach for addressing a theoretical or practical problem (Kaplan, 1964). In short, as has been said elsewhere, method is about "how to" and methodology is about "why to" collect data a certain way. Both are pertinent to research design. In designing a study, all social science researchers begin with a set of questions about a social problem. Subsequently, they simultaneously consider constructs and theories that can adequately facilitate how the problem is conceptually understood while also thinking about the practical dimensions of collecting data. Some basic questions a researcher will ask, for example, are as follows:

- How will I gain access to and recruit participants?
- How will participants respond to my questions?
- What will their responses help me to understand about the selected phenomenon under investigation?
- Do my research questions reflect what I am seeking to conceptually understand?

Each of these questions is very important to beginning an investigation.

If you are a quantitative researcher, you will want to statistically assess some aspect of a research problem through the use of experimental or survey design procedures. The purpose of an experiment is to test the impact of an intervention on an outcome while controlling for various factors that might influence that outcome. When a researcher wants to know about certain attitudes, trends, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population, a survey design is employed. Both experimental and survey designs result in the report of generalizations made by a sample in representation of a particular population (Cresswell, 2003).

Stake (1995) maintains that there are three major differences between quantitative and qualitative research:

> (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. (p. 37)

So, as we discuss our concern in this essay with respect to defining the nature, function, and types of qualitative inquiry, we will also be pointing out the significance of understanding as a purpose of qualitative research as well as the significance of both a personal role and social construction of reality within this paradigm. If you are a qualitative researcher, you will be primarily concerned with what Lincoln and Guba (1985) call "the human as instrument" approach. In other words, the focus turns to understanding human beings' richly textured experiences and reflections about those experiences. Rather than relying on a set of finite questions to elicit

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categorized, forced-choice responses with little room for open-ended replies to questions as quantitative research does, the qualitative researcher relies on the participants to offer in-depth responses to questions about how they have constructed or understood their experience. This humanistic, interpretive approach is also called "thick-descriptive" because of the richness and detail to the discussion. By design, the qualitative researcher will get much more information about a phenomenon, realizing that the major drawback will be that the results will not be generalizable to a population because very few participants participate in studies offering so much depth of detail. Moreover, the researcher tends to be more cognizant of his or her personal rather than impersonal role in the research. This recognition of subjectivity also leads to enhanced safeguards for trustworthiness such as member-checking. By doing this, the researcher notes that his or her study of others' experiences borders the investigator's experience as well, and this has implications for social scientific interpretation of the data collected.

Synonymous with non-experimental and ethnographic inquiry, qualitative inquiry or research has its intellectual roots in hermeneutics, the Verstehen tradition, and phenomenology. It encompasses all forms of social inquiry that rely primarily on non-numeric data in the form of words, including all types of textual analyses such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses. The aim and function of qualitative inquiry is to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). There are several types of qualitative inquiry and modes of qualitative data collection that are aligned with the humanistic tradition.

Before exploring these types, it is important to note that some scholars think of phenomenology as a methodology, and as methodology it nicely frames what most interpretive researchers see as their concerns. Phenomenology is a multifaceted philosophy that defies simple characterization. Generally, phenomenologists reject the idea that the only legitimate knowledge is that which social scientists discover by ignoring the perceived world of everyday human experience. In fact, phenomenologists privilege the subjective description of conscious every-day mundane experiences from the perspective of those living them (Crotty, 1998). For this reason, this philosophy is at the foundation of much of the qualitative research conducted within the social sciences, including communication.

Qualitative Methodologies

Methodologies suggest how inquiries should proceed by indicating what problems are worth investigating, how to frame a problem so it can be explored, how to develop appropriate data generation, and how to make the logical link between the problem, data generated, analysis, and conclusions/inferences drawn. Methodologies have a synergetic relationship with methods and are often defined differently based on the philosophical stance advocated by the researcher (Kaplan, 1964). Nevertheless, in exploring types of qualitative inquiry, it is evident that most qualitative researchers first identify a text or social object that is suitable for analysis, even if it is a visual text

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such as a movie or photograph. Even visual images representing social life and/or social actions can be read as written text (Ricoeur, 1981). Methodologies that privilege the exploration of texts vary along a continuum from content analysis, discourse analysis, and narrative analysis to conversation analysis. On one end, the focus is on *what* was said (content; e.g., content analysis), and at the other end, *how* something was said (form; e.g., conversation analysis). In the middle is the concern for both form and content (e.g., narrative analysis; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

Content analysis is a generic name for a variety of ways for conducting systematic, objective, quantitative, and/or qualitative textual analysis that involves comparing, contrasting, and categorizing a set of data primarily to test hypotheses. This type of analysis usually relies on some statistical procedures for sampling and establishing inter-coder reliability (Krippendorf, 1980). Essentially, qualitative content analysis involves interpreting, theorizing, or making sense of data by first breaking it down into segments that can be categorized and coded, and then establishing a pattern for the entire data set by relating the categories to one another (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Conversation analysis is a form of textual analysis that arose out of the sociological approach of ethnomethodology based in part on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Ethnomethodology is interested in how people accomplish everyday, taken-for-granted interactions like making promises and negotiating (Garfinkel, 1967). One method for exploring these interactions is through conversation analysis, as it is concerned with examining the linguistic organization of talk to show how speakers produce orderly social interaction (Silverman, 1998). Similarly, *discourse analysis* is a way for examining language as it is used in specific contexts; however, it is more strictly focused on the content of talk, highlighting the practices that comprise the ideologies, attitudes, ideas, and courses of action that systematically constitute the subjects and objects of which people speak (Foucault, 1972).

Content analysis, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis are not the only forms of textual analyses popular in communication. A broad term used to refer to a variety of procedures for interpreting stories generated in research, *narrative analysis* encompasses structural and functional forms of analyses. The researcher examines how a story is developed, organized, begins and ends, as well as, its goals or aims (Riessman, 1993). Stories analyzed are of lived experiences often chronicled in life histories, interviews, journals, diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, or biographies (Josselson & Liebech, 1995).

Unlike the aforementioned methodologies, which seek to deconstruct a text to help us understand the social realities of human beings, one increasingly popular methodology seeks to produce a written text through which we can vicariously experience various social realities. *Ethnography* is the art and science of describing and interpreting cultural behavior from a close textual-analytic standpoint. The typical ethnography is presented in monograph form and describes the historical events and geographic, economic, political, educational, linguistic, and kinship systems that define a particular group (Wolcott, 1987).

Embedded within conventional ethnography are *critical ethnography* and *autoethnography*. They share fundamental characteristics but are distinguishable. Generally,

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conventional ethnographers speak *for* their subjects to an audience of academics, while critical ethnographers speak to a wider audience *on behalf* of their subjects seeking empowerment for them while simultaneously invoking social consciousness and political change (Thomas, 1993). Increasingly, communication scholars are engaging in the study of their own communities or cultures by using themselves as the object of study, portending "self as instrument." Known as autoethnography, this form of writing attempts to unite ethnographic (looking beyond one's world) and autobiographical (looking inward for a personal story) intentions. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is not to make any claims through interpretations and analyses, but to simply invite readers to share in a lived experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Methods of Data Collection

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"Method" refers to the tools, techniques, or procedures used to generate data (Kaplan, 1964). In conducting qualitative research, interviewing is a set of techniques for generating data from individuals and/or groups utilizing structured, semi-structured, or unstructured questioning formats. Generally, semi- or unstructured, open-ended, informal interviewing is preferred to allow for more flexibility and responsiveness to emerging themes for both the interviewer and respondent. The analysis of transcribed interviews is dependent on the specific methodological approach employed (e.g., the meticulous word-to-word transcription of conversation analysis to the more broad-based thematic analysis of ethnographic interviews; see Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Often, interviewing is used in conjunction with other modes of data collection like focus groups, case studies, ethnography, and/or or participant observation.

As one way of collecting data in qualitative research, *focus groups* are group interviews (typically involving 5–12 people) that rely on the interaction within the group and the questions asked of the moderator to provide insight into specific topics. Focus group interviews can serve as the principal source of data, as a supplementary source of data, or as one component of a multimethod approach to data collection. The primary advantage for the researcher in conducting focus groups is the ability to observe a large amount of interaction among multiple participants on one or more topics in a limited amount of time. However, this is also the primary disadvantage, because focus groups are viewed as unnatural social settings (Morgan, 1997), and there is a possibility that groupthink may threaten the dependability of the data, especially in situations where actual or perceived experts and non-experts are both included.

Another approach that can be quite intensive is the *case study approach* to data collection, which is preferred in the following circumstances:

1. the researcher wants to answer "how" or "why" questions;
2. the researcher has little control over the contemporary real-life context to be studied; and
3. when the boundaries between the context and phenomenon are not clear.

It can be used for analytic generalization (Yin, 1989). Analytic generalization, also referred to as theoretical elaboration, is a type of generalization in which the researcher uses a particular set of circumstances, like a case, as evidence to refine, dispute, support or detail a concept, model, or theory. However, the case is never regarded or portrayed as a definitive test of the theory (Vaughan, 1992). Also, in a case study, the researcher is often at a distance from the context under examination and is studying the phenomenon by collecting multiple artifacts or kinds of data. These data can include interviews, focus groups, printed materials, media, and other sources of data.

Distinguishable from the aforementioned methods of data collection, *fieldwork* is accomplished through participant observation and is the means by which the ethnographer comes to know a culture. Participant observation requires one to spend time engaged in a setting, taking part in the daily activities of the people under study and recording, as soon as possible, observed activities in the form of fieldnotes (Stocking, 1983). The term fieldwork refers to all of the activities one does when at the physical site of a cultural group, such as listening, observing, conversing, recording, interpreting, and dealing with logistical, ethical, and political issues. Participant observation is the traditional methodology employed in fieldwork, although life-histories, oral histories, action research, and other forms of case studies and co-participative inquires also entail aspects of fieldwork (Wolcott, 1995).

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Criteria for Evaluating Qualitative Research

Rather than conventional measures of trustworthiness, such as internal/external validity, reliability, and objectivity, that are at the core of quantitative research, the qualitative research design tests trustworthiness via credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, respectively. Good qualitative research applies standards of trustworthiness such as member-checking, stepwise replication, and audit trails, each of which seeks to verify the substance of what participants said so that interpretations are not subjective iterations of the researcher's own belief system. Specifically, member-checking assists in validating qualitative research findings, as themes and descriptions are taken back to participants to determine whether or not *participants* feel they are accurate. Peer briefing and the use of external auditors serve to enhance the credibility of a study by assessing whether the findings resonate with *others* not connected with the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Collectively, these facilitate *objectivity*, *ethical diligence*, and *rigor*. Obviously, when doing an autoethnography, these verification checks are very personal, yet phenomenology has outlined ways in which the researcher can parse out streams of consciousness that are intricately entangled in experiences related to the research study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Because experience is key to qualitative inquiry, observations of interpretive data must be able to account for varying kinds of experiences in a way that is particularized or idiographic rather than generalized and law-bound or nomothetic. In grappling with what qualitative research is, we must be ever-conscious that social

experience is always happening, unending, and fluid. Perspectives on experience can change from person to person, yet it is perspective that influences social cognition and social behavior. Perspective influences relationships and interaction patterns. So, even as scholars understand the significance of perspective, there are constantly evolving ways of understanding perspective in varying contexts from very naturalistic to lab-oriented contexts. Of course, observing a phenomenon in its natural setting is often the optimal way to examine what is happening; yet there are compelling reasons to place people in unnatural settings and manipulate the situation to see how people will respond to a stimulus. This sounds like quantitative, experimental research, but qualitative researchers may also do something similar by showing interviewees an object, image, or some other stimulus in order to prompt further reflection. In social scientists' quest for truth and understanding, text and context have value for all, regardless of methodology.

As scholars become even more curious and think of expanding ways to collect data using new technologies and approaches, it is important to bear in mind that it is the responsibility of every researcher to approach each study with as much *objectivity, ethical diligence, and rigor* as possible.

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