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Designing a Qualitative Study

I think metaphorically of qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. This fabric is not explained easily or simply. Like the loom on which fabric is woven, general worldviews and perspectives hold qualitative research together. To describe these frameworks, qualitative researchers use terms—constructivist, interpretivist, feminist, methodology, postmodernist, and naturalistic research. Within these worldviews and through these lenses are approaches to qualitative inquiry, such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. This field has many different individuals with different perspectives who are on their own looms creating the fabric of qualitative research. Aside from these differences, the creative artists are all at work making a fabric. In other words, there are characteristics common to all forms of qualitative research, and the different characteristics will receive different emphases depending on the qualitative project.

[The basic intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of and introduction to qualitative research so that we can see the common characteristics of qualitative research before we explore the different threads of it.] I begin with a general definition of qualitative research and highlight the essential characteristics of conducting this form of inquiry. I then discuss the types of research problems and issues best suited for a qualitative study and emphasize the requirements needed to conduct this rigorous, time-consuming research. Given that you have the essentials (the problem, the time) to engage in this inquiry, I then sketch out the overall process involved in designing and planning a study. I end by suggesting several outlines that you might

consider as the overall structure for planning or proposing a qualitative research study. The chapters to follow will then address the different types of inquiry approaches. The general design features, outlined here, will be refined for the five approaches emphasized in this book.

Questions for Discussion

- What are the key characteristics of qualitative research?
- Why do researchers conduct a qualitative study?
- What is required to undertake this type of research?
- How do researchers design a qualitative study?
- What topics should be addressed in a plan or proposal for a qualitative study?

The Characteristics of Qualitative Research

I typically begin talking about qualitative research by posing a definition for it. This seemingly uncomplicated approach has become more difficult in recent years. I note that some extremely useful introductory books to qualitative research these days do not contain a definition that can be easily located (Morse & Richards, 2002, 2007; Weis & Fine, 2000). Perhaps this has less to do with the authors' decision to convey the nature of this inquiry and more to do with a concern about advancing a "fixed" definition. It is interesting, however, to look at the evolving definition by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005) as their *Handbook of Qualitative Research* has moved through time. Their definition conveys the ever-changing nature of qualitative inquiry from social construction, to interpretivist, and on to social justice. I include their latest definition here:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3)

Although some of the traditional approaches to qualitative research, such as the "interpretive, naturalistic approach" and "meanings," are evident in

this definition, the definition also has a strong orientation toward the impact of qualitative research and in transforming the world.

As an applied research methodologist, my working definition of qualitative research emphasizes the design of research and the use of distinct approaches to inquiry (e.g., ethnography, narrative). At this time, I provide this definition:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action.

Notice in this definition that I place emphasis on the *process* of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions, to worldviews and through a theoretical lens, and on to the procedures involved in studying social or human problems. Then, a framework exists for the procedures—the approach to inquiry, such as grounded theory, or case study research. At a more micro level are the procedures that are common to all forms of qualitative research.

Examine Table 3.1 for three recent introductory qualitative research books and the characteristics they espouse for doing a qualitative study. As compared to a similar table I designed almost 10 years ago in the first edition of this book (drawing on other authors), qualitative research today involves closer attention to the interpretive nature of inquiry and situating the study within the political, social, and cultural context of the researchers, the participants, and the readers of a study. By examining Table 3.1, one can arrive at several common characteristics of qualitative research. These are presented in no specific order of importance:

- *Natural setting*—Qualitative researchers tend to collect data in the field at the site where participants' experience the issue or problem under study. They do not bring individuals into a lab (a contrived situation), nor do they typically send out instruments for individuals to complete. This up-close information gathered by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context is a major characteristic of qualitative research. In the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction over time.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Characteristics	LeCompte & Schensul (1999)	Marshall & Rossman (2006)	Hatch (2002)
Natural setting (field focused), a source of data for close interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes
Researcher as key instrument of data collection			Yes
Multiple data sources in words or images	Yes	Yes	
Analysis of data inductively, recursively, interactively	Yes	Yes	Yes
Focus on participants' perspectives, their meanings, their subjective views	Yes		Yes
Framing of human behavior and belief within a social-political/historical context or through a cultural lens	Yes		
Emergent rather than tightly prefigured design		Yes	Yes
Fundamentally interpretive inquiry—researcher reflects on her or his role, the role of the reader, and the role of the participants in shaping the study		Yes	
Holistic view of social phenomena		Yes	Yes

- *Researcher as key instrument.* The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. They may use a protocol—an instrument for collecting data—but the researchers are the ones who actually gather the information. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers.

- *Multiple sources of data.* Qualitative researchers typically gather multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source. Then the researchers review all of the data and make sense of them, organizing them into categories or themes that cut across all of the data sources.

- *Inductive data analysis.* Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the “bottom-up,” by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information. This inductive process

involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes. It may also involve collaborating with the participants interactively, so that they have a chance to shape the themes or abstractions that emerge from the process.

- *Participants' meanings.* In the entire qualitative research process, the researchers keep a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue, not the meaning that the researchers bring to the research or writers from the literature.

- *Emergent design.* The research process for qualitative researchers is emergent. This means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and that all phases of the process may change or shift after the researchers enter the field and begin to collect data. For example, the questions may change, the forms of data collection may shift, and the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified. The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information.

- *Theoretical lens.* Qualitative researchers often use a lens to view their studies, such as the concept of culture, central to ethnography, or gendered, racial, or class differences from the theoretical orientations discussed in Chapter 2. Sometimes, the study may be organized around identifying the social, political, or historical context of the problem under study.

- *Interpretive inquiry.* Qualitative research is a form of inquiry in which researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear, and understand. The researchers' interpretations cannot be separated from their own background, history, context, and prior understandings. After a research report is issued, the readers make an interpretation as well as the participants, offering yet other interpretations of the study. With the readers, the participants, and the researchers all making an interpretation, we can see how multiple views of the problem can emerge.

- *Holistic account.* Qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not by tight cause-and-effect relationships among factors, but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation.

When to Use Qualitative Research

When is it appropriate to use qualitative research? We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored. This exploration

is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that can then be measured, or hear silenced voices. These are all good reasons to explore a problem rather than to use predetermined information from the literature or rely on results from other research studies. We also conduct qualitative research because we need a *complex*, detailed understanding of the issue. This detail can only be established by talking directly with people, going to their homes or places of work, and allowing them to tell the stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature. We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study. To further de-emphasize a power relationship, we may collaborate directly with participants by having them review our research questions, or by having them collaborate with us during the data analysis and interpretation phases of research. We conduct qualitative research when we want to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories, or theater, or poems, without the restrictions of formal academic structures of writing. We conduct qualitative research because we want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. We cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it—whether this context is their home, family, or work. We use qualitative research to follow up quantitative research and help explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models. These theories provide a general picture of trends, associations, and relationships, but they do not tell us about why people responded as they did, the context in which they responded, and their deeper thoughts and behaviors that governed their responses. We use qualitative research to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. We also use qualitative research because quantitative measures and the statistical analyses simply do not *fit* the problem. Interactions among people, for example, are difficult to capture with existing measures, and these measures may not be sensitive to issues such as gender differences, race, economic status, and individual differences. To level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies. Qualitative approaches are simply a better fit for our research problem.

What does it take to engage in this form of research? To undertake qualitative research requires a strong commitment to study a problem and demands time and resources. Qualitative research keeps good company with the most rigorous quantitative research, and it should not be viewed as an

easy substitute for a “statistical” or quantitative study. Qualitative inquiry is for the researcher who is willing to do the following:

- Commit to extensive time in the field. The investigator spends many hours in the field, collects extensive data, and labors over field issues of trying to gain access, rapport, and an “insider” perspective.
- Engage in the complex, time-consuming process of data analysis through the ambitious task of sorting through large amounts of data and reducing them to a few themes or categories. For a multidisciplinary team of qualitative researchers, this task can be shared; for most researchers, it is a lonely, isolated time of struggling with the data. The task is challenging, especially because the database consists of complex texts and images.
- Write long passages, because the evidence must substantiate claims and the writer needs to show multiple perspectives. The incorporation of quotes to provide participants’ perspectives also lengthens the study.
- Participate in a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and constantly changing. This guideline complicates telling others how one plans to conduct a study and how others might judge it when the study is completed.

The Process of Designing a Qualitative Study

At the outset, I need to say that there is no agreed upon structure for how to design a qualitative study. Books on qualitative research vary. Some authors believe that by reading about a study, discussing the procedures, and pointing out issues that emerged, the aspiring qualitative researcher will have a sense of how to conduct this form of inquiry (see Weis & Fine, 2000). That may be true for some individuals. For others, understanding the broader issues may suffice (see Morse & Richards, 2002, 2007), or guidance from a “how to” book may be better (see Hatch, 2002). I am not sure whether I write from exactly a “how to” perspective; my approach is more in line with creating options for qualitative researchers (hence, the five approaches), weighing the options given my experiences, and then letting readers choose for themselves.

There are certain design principles that I work from when I design my own qualitative research studies. First, I do find that qualitative research generally falls within the process of scientific research, with common phases whether one is writing qualitatively or quantitatively. All researchers seem to start with an issue or problem, examine the literature in some way related to the problem, pose questions, gather data and then analyze them, and write up

their reports. Qualitative research fits within this structure, and I have accordingly organized the chapters in this book to reflect this process. Second, several aspects of a qualitative project vary from study to study as to the amount of detail developed by researchers. For example, stances on the use of the literature vary widely, as do the stances on using an a priori theory. The literature may be fully reviewed and used to inform the questions actually asked, it may be reviewed late in the process of research, or it may be used solely to help document the importance of the research problem. Other options may also exist, but these possibilities point to the varied uses of literature in qualitative research. Similarly, the use of theory varies extensively. For example, cultural theories form the basic building blocks of a good qualitative ethnography (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999), whereas in grounded theory, the theories are developed or generated during the process of research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In health science research, I find the use of a priori theories common practice, and a key element that must be included in a rigorous qualitative investigation (Barbour, 2000). Another consideration in qualitative research is the writing format for the qualitative project. It varies considerably from scientific-oriented approaches, to storytelling, and on to performances, such as theater, plays, or poems. There is no one standard or accepted structure as one typically finds in quantitative research.

Given these differences, we still are left with the graduate student who needs to organize a qualitative thesis or dissertation, researchers who need to submit a proposal for state or federal funding, and the research team that seeks to investigate a timely issue in the social, behavioral, or health sciences. All of these individuals will probably profit from having some structure to their qualitative writing. Thus, I would like to discuss a general approach to designing a qualitative study and then begin to shape this design as we visit the five approaches to qualitative research in this book. I like the concept of “methodological congruence” advanced by Morse and Richards (2002, 2007)—that the purposes, questions, and methods of research are all interconnected and interrelated so that the study appears as a cohesive whole rather than as fragmented, isolated parts.

The process of designing a qualitative study begins not with the methods—which is actually the easiest part of research, I believe—but instead with the broad assumptions central to qualitative inquiry, a worldview consistent with it, and in many cases, a theoretical lens that shapes the study. In addition, the researcher arrives at the doorstep of qualitative research with a topic or substantive area of investigation, and perhaps has reviewed the literature about the topic and knows that a problem or issue exists that needs to be studied. This problem may be one in the “real world” or it may be a deficiency in the literature or past investigations on a topic. Problems in

qualitative research span the topics in the social and human sciences, and a hallmark of qualitative research today is the deep involvement in issues of gender, culture, and marginalized groups. The topics about which we write are emotion laden, close to people, and practical.

To study these topics, we ask open-ended research questions, wanting to listen to the participants we are studying and shaping the questions after we “explore,” and we refrain from assuming the role of the expert researcher with the “best” questions. Our questions change during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem. Furthermore, we take these questions out to the field to collect either “words” or “images.” I like to think in terms of four basic types of information: interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials. Certainly, new forms emerge that challenge this traditional categorization. Where do we place sounds, e-mail messages, and computer software? Unquestionably, the backbone of qualitative research is extensive collection of data, typically from multiple sources of information. After organizing and storing our data, we analyze them by carefully masking the names of respondents, and we engage in the perplexing (and “lonely” if we are the sole researcher) exercise of trying to make sense of the data. We examine the qualitative data working inductively from particulars to more general perspectives, whether these perspectives are called themes, dimensions, codes, or categories. One helpful way to see this process is to recognize it as working through multiple levels of abstraction, starting with the raw data and forming larger and larger categories. Recognizing the highly interrelated set of activities of data collection, analysis, and report writing, we do not always know clearly which stage we are in. I remember working on a case study (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995) as interviewing, analyzing, and writing the case study—all intermingled processes, not distinct phases in the process. Also, we experiment with many forms of analysis—making metaphors, developing matrices and tables, and using visuals—to convey simultaneously breaking down the data and reconfiguring them into new forms. We (re)present our data, partly based on participants’ perspectives and partly based on our own interpretation, never clearly escaping our own personal stamp on a study.

Throughout the slow process of collecting data and analyzing them, we shape our narrative—a narrative with many forms in qualitative research. We tell a story that unfolds over time. We present the study following the traditional approach to scientific research (i.e., problem, question, method, findings). We talk about our experiences in conducting the study, and how they shape our interpretations of the results. We let the voices of our participants speak and carry the story through dialogue, perhaps dialogue presented in Spanish with English subtitles.

Throughout all phases of the research process we are sensitive to ethical considerations. These are especially important as we negotiate entry to the field site of the research; involve participants in our study; gather personal, emotional data that reveal the details of life; and ask participants to give considerable time to our projects. Hatch (2002) does a good job of summarizing some of the major ethical issues that researchers need to anticipate and often address in their studies. Giving back to participants for their time and efforts in our projects—reciprocity—is important, and we need to review how participants will gain from our studies. How to leave the scene of a research study—through slow withdrawal and conveying information about our departure—so that the participants do not feel abandoned is also important. We always need to be sensitive to the potential of our research to disturb the site and potentially (and often unintentionally) exploit the vulnerable populations we study, such as young children or underrepresented or marginalized groups. Along with this comes a need to be sensitive to any power imbalances our presence may establish at a site that could further marginalize the people under study. We do not want to place the participants at further risk as a result of our research. We need to anticipate how to address potential illegal activities that we see or hear, and, in some cases, report them to authorities. We need to honor who owns the account, and whether participants and leaders at our research sites will be concerned about this issue. As we work with individual participants, we need to respect them individually, such as by not stereotyping them, using their language and names, and following guidelines such as those found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2001) for nondiscriminatory language. Most often our research is done within the context of a college or university setting where we need to provide evidence to institutional review boards or committees that we respect the privacy and right of participants to withdraw from the study and do not place them at risk. At this stage, too, we consciously consider ethical issues—seeking consent, avoiding the conundrum of deception, maintaining confidentiality, and protecting the anonymity of individuals with whom we speak. Weis and Fine (2000) ask us to consider our roles as insiders/outsiders to the participants; issues that we may be fearful of disclosing; how we established supportive, respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace; whose voice will be represented in our final study; and how we will write ourselves into the study and reflect who we are as well as reflect the people we study (Weiss & Fine, 2000). We need to be sensitive to vulnerable populations, imbalanced power relations, and placing participants at risk (Hatch, 2002).

At some point we ask, “Did we get the story ‘right?’” (Stake, 1995), knowing that there are no “right” stories, only multiple stories. Perhaps

qualitative studies do not have endings, only questions (Wolcott, 1994b). But we seek to have our account resonate with the participants, to be an accurate reflection of what they said. So we engage in validation strategies, often using multiple strategies, which include confirming or triangulating data from several sources, having our studies reviewed and corrected by the participants, and having other researchers review our procedures.

In the end, individuals such as readers, participants, graduate committees, editorial board members for journals, and reviewers of proposals for funding will apply some criteria to assess the quality of the study. Standards for assessing the quality of qualitative research are available (Howe & Eisenhardt, 1990; Lincoln, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Here is my short list of *characteristics of a “good” qualitative study*. You will see my emphasis on rigorous methods present in this list.

- The researcher employs rigorous data collection procedures. This means that the researcher collects multiple forms of data, adequately summarizes—perhaps in tabled form—the forms of data and detail about them, and spends adequate time in the field. It is not unusual for qualitative studies to include information about the specific amount of time in the field. I especially like to see unusual forms of qualitative data collection, such as using photographs to elicit responses, sounds, visual materials, or digital text messages.
- The researcher frames the study within the assumptions and characteristics of the qualitative approach to research. This includes fundamental characteristics such as an evolving design, the presentation of multiple realities, the researcher as an instrument of data collection, and a focus on participants’ views—in short, all of the characteristics mentioned in Table 3.1.
- The researcher uses an approach to qualitative inquiry such as one of the five approaches addressed in this book. Use of a recognized approach to research enhances the rigor and sophistication of the research design. This means that the researcher identifies and defines the approach, cites studies that employ it, and follows the procedures outline in the approach. Certainly, this approach need not be “pure,” and one might mix procedures from several approaches; however, for the beginning student of qualitative research, I would recommend staying within one approach, becoming comfortable with it, learning it, and keeping a study concise and straightforward. Later, especially in long and complex studies, features from several approaches may be useful.
- The researcher begins with a single focus. Although examples of qualitative research show a comparison of groups or of factors or themes, as in

case study projects or in ethnographies, I like to begin a qualitative study focused on understanding a single concept or idea (e.g., What does it mean to be a professional? A teacher? A painter? A single mother? A homeless person?). As the study progresses, it can begin incorporating the comparison (e.g., How does the case of a professional teacher differ from a professional administrator?) or relating factors (e.g., What explains why painting evokes feelings?). All too often qualitative researchers advance to the comparison or the relationship analysis without first understanding their core concept or idea.

- The study includes detailed methods, a rigorous approach to data collection, data analysis, and report writing. Rigor is seen when extensive data collection in the field occurs, or when the researcher conducts multiple levels of data analysis, from the narrow codes or themes to broader inter-related themes to more abstract dimensions. Rigor means, too, that the researcher validates the accuracy of the account using one or more of the procedures for validation, such as member checking, triangulating sources of data, or using peer or external auditors of the accounts.

- The researcher analyzes data using multiple levels of abstraction. I like to see the active work of the researcher as he or she moves from particulars to general levels of abstraction. Often, writers present their studies in stages (e.g., the multiple themes that can be combined into larger themes or perspectives) or layer their analyses from the particular to the general. The codes and themes derived from the data might show mundane, expected, and surprising ideas. Often the best qualitative studies present themes that explore the shadow side or unusual angles. I remember in one class project, the student examined how students in a distance learning class reacted to the camera focused on the class. Rather than looking at the students' reaction when the camera was on them, the researcher sought to understand what happened when the camera was *off* them. This approach led to the author taking an unusual angle, one not expected by the readers.

- The researcher writes persuasively so that the reader experiences “being there.” The concept of “verisimilitude,” a literary term, captures my thinking (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). The writing is clear, engaging, and full of unexpected ideas. The story and findings become believable and realistic, accurately reflecting all the complexities that exist in real life. The best qualitative studies engage the reader.

- The study reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher. This is more than simply an autobiography, with the writer or the researcher telling about his or her background. It focuses on how

individuals' culture, gender, history, and experiences shape all aspects of the qualitative project, from their choice of a question to address, to how they collect data, to how they make an interpretation of the situation. In some way—such as discussing their role, interweaving themselves into the text, or reflecting on the questions they have about the study—individuals position themselves in the qualitative study.

- The qualitative research in a good study is ethical. This involves more than simply the researcher seeking and obtaining the permission of institutional review committees or boards. It means that the researcher is aware of and addressing in the study all of the ethical issues mentioned earlier in this chapter that thread through all phases of the research study.

The General Structure of a Plan or Proposal

Look at the diversity of final written products for qualitative research. No set format exists. But several writers suggest general topics to be included in a written plan or *proposal* for a qualitative study. I provide four examples of formats for plans or proposals for qualitative studies. In the first example, drawn from my own work (Creswell, 2003, pp. 50–51), I advance a constructionist/interpretivist form. This form (shown in Example 3.1 below) might be seen as a traditional approach to planning qualitative research, and it includes the standard introduction and procedures, including a passage in the procedures about the role of the researcher. It also incorporates anticipated ethical issues, pilot findings, and expected outcomes.

Example 3.1 A Qualitative Constructivist/ Interpretivist Format

Introduction

Statement of the problem (including literature about the problem)

Purpose of the study

The research questions

Delimitations and limitations

Procedures

Characteristics of qualitative research (optional)

Qualitative research strategy

Role of the researcher

- Data collection procedures
- Data analysis procedures
- Strategies for validating findings
- Narrative structure
- Anticipated ethical issues
- Significance of the study
- Preliminary pilot findings
- Expected outcomes
- Appendices: Interview questions, observational forms, timeline, and proposed budget

The second format provides for an advocacy perspective (Creswell, 2003, pp. 51–52). This format (as shown in Example 3.2 below) makes explicit the advocacy, transformative approach to qualitative research by stating the advocacy issue at the beginning, by emphasizing collaboration during the data collection, and by advancing the changes advocated for the group being studied.

Example 3.2 A Qualitative Advocacy/Participatory Format

Introduction

- Statement of the problem (including literature about the problem)
- The advocacy/participatory issue
- Purpose of the study
- The research questions
- Delimitations and limitations

Procedures

- Characteristics of qualitative research (optional)
- Qualitative research strategy
- Role of the researcher
- Data collection procedures (including the collaborative approaches used and sensitivity toward participants)
- Data recording procedures

- Data analysis procedures
- Strategies for validating findings
- Narrative structure of study
- Anticipated ethical issues
- Significance of the study
- Preliminary pilot findings
- Expected advocacy/participatory changes
- Appendices: Interview questions, observational forms, timeline, and proposed budget

The third format, Example 3.3, is similar to the advocacy format, but it advances the use of a theoretical lens (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Notice that this format has a section for a theoretical lens (e.g., feminist, racial, ethnic) that informs the study in the literature review, “trustworthiness” in place of what I have been calling “validation,” a section for being reflexive through personal biography, and both the ethical and political considerations of the author.

Example 3.3 A Theoretical Lens Format

Introduction

- Overview
- Type and purpose
- Potential significance
- Framework and general research questions
- Limitations

Review of related literature

- Theoretical traditions
- Essays by informed experts
- Related research

Design and methodology

- Overall approach and rationale
- Site or population selection
- Data-gathering methods
- Data analysis procedures

Trustworthiness

Personal biography

Ethics and political considerations

Appendices: Interview questions, observational forms, timeline, and proposed budget

In the fourth and final format, Example 3.4, Maxwell (2005) organizes the structure around a series of nine arguments that he feels need to cohere and be coherent when researchers design their qualitative proposals. I think that these nine arguments represent the most important points to include in a proposal, and Maxwell provides in his book a complete example of a qualitative dissertation proposal written by Martha G. Regan-Smith at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. My summary and adaptation of these arguments follow.

Example 3.4 Maxwell's Nine Arguments for a Qualitative Proposal

We need to better understand . . . (the topic).

We know little about . . . (the topic).

I propose to study. . . .

The setting and participants are appropriate for this study.

The methods I plan to use will provide the data I need to answer the research questions.

Analysis will generate answers to these questions.

The findings will be validated by. . . .

The study poses no serious ethical problems.

Preliminary results support the practicability and value of the study.

These four examples speak only to designing a plan or proposal for a qualitative study. To the topics of these proposal formats, the complete study will include additional data findings, interpretations, and a discussion of the overall results, limitations of the study, and future research needs.

Summary

The definitions for qualitative research vary, but I see it as an approach to inquiry that begins with assumptions, worldviews, possibly a theoretical

lens, and the study of research problems exploring the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. Researchers collect data in natural settings with a sensitivity to the people under study, and they analyze their data inductively to establish patterns or themes. The final report provides for the voices of participants, a reflexivity of the researchers, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and a study that adds to the literature or provides a call for action. Recent introductory textbooks underscore the characteristics embedded in this definition. Given this definition, a qualitative approach is appropriate to use to study a research problem when the problem needs to be explored; when a complex, detailed understanding is needed; when the researcher wants to write in a literary, flexible style; and when the researcher seeks to understand the context or settings of participants. Qualitative research does take time, involves ambitious data analysis, results in lengthy reports, and does not have firm guidelines.

The process of designing a qualitative study emerges during inquiry, but it generally follows the pattern of scientific research. It starts with broad assumptions central to qualitative inquiry, worldview stances, and theoretical lens and a topic of inquiry. After stating a research problem or issue about this topic, the inquirer asks several open-ended research questions, gathers multiple forms of data to answer these questions, and makes sense of the data by grouping information into codes, themes or categories, and larger dimensions. The final narrative the researcher composes will have diverse formats—from a scientific type of study to narrative stories. Ethical decisions are threaded throughout the study. Several aspects will make the study a good qualitative project: rigorous data collection and analysis; the use of a qualitative approach (e.g., narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study); a single focus: a persuasive account; a reflection on the researcher's own history, culture, personal experiences, and politics; and ethical practices.

Finally, the structure of a plan or proposal for a qualitative study will vary. I include four models that differ in terms of their advocacy orientation, inclusion of personal and political considerations, and focus on the essential arguments that researchers need to address in proposals.

Additional Readings

There are many introductory textbooks on qualitative research. At the beginning of this chapter I introduced three books that differ in their approaches: Marshall and Rossman (2006), which takes a rigorous methods approach; LeCompte and Schensul (1999), which is drawn from ethnography; and Hatch (2002), a text that was created for educators but, because of the