Chapter 6

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Objectives
After reading Chapter 6, you should be able to do the following:

1. State the purposes of qualitative research.
2. Identify the six general steps in qualitative research.
3. State the characteristics of good qualitative methods.
4. Identify strategies for finding and selecting research topics.
5. Identify strategies for reviewing literature for a qualitative study.
6. Describe roles involved in gaining entry to the research site and obtaining gatekeeper approval.
7. Describe the three models of mixed-method research.

Task 6
Apply the six steps of qualitative research to develop a plan for your own qualitative research study. (See Performance Criteria, page 256. Task 6 Example and Performance Criteria appear at the end of Chapter 8.)

The Nature of Qualitative Research
Qualitative, interpretive research is useful for describing and answering questions about participants and contexts. The researcher studies the perspectives of the research participants toward events, beliefs, or practices. Qualitative research is also useful for exploring complex research areas about which little is known. Qualitative research is exceptionally suited for exploration, for beginning to understand a group or phenomenon. Such explorations often result in development of new theories. Finally, qualitative research can answer questions and illuminate issues that cannot be addressed by quantitative methods.

In considering qualitative research, it is useful to know some things about its understandings. For example, qualitative research approaches are rooted in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and history. These disciplines rely heavily on rich, oral, qualitative, interpretive descriptions in their research methods, rather than on numerical, statistical, quantitative descriptions. Similarly, qualitative disciplines strive to capture the human meanings of social life as it is lived, experienced, and understood by the research participant. Capturing this social context is very important in qualitative research.


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because qualitative researchers view each context studied to be unique. Because qualitative researchers rely heavily on verbal description, researchers are their own main instrument of data collection, interpretation, and written narrative. It is commonly noted that in qualitative research "the researcher is the research method." Thus, the qualitative researcher is a critical source of data collection and interpretation. Further, although different from quantitative research methods, qualitative researchers also rely on disciplined inquiry in their research. Good qualitative research is investigative, inductive, and rigorous in research methods and data collection techniques, avoids bias to ensure data accuracy, and emphasizes the voices and settings of the participants in the research.7

SIX GENERAL STEPS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

In chapter 1, we presented four general, conceptual research steps. For practical reasons, we here expand the steps to six to help you delineate your tasks. Similar to quantitative research, qualitative researchers follow six basic steps. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, these steps characterize both qualitative and quantitative research; however, the application of the step differs. For example, quantitative research is often more rigid than qualitative research procedures. Similarly, while both quantitative and qualitative researchers collect data, the nature of the data collected differs. Figure 6.1 compares the six steps of qualitative and quantitative research and lists traits that characterize each approach at every step.

For the most part, the methods used to conduct varied types of qualitative research are similar. Because of these commonalities, we will focus on general methods used to identify research topics, review related literature, select participants, collect data, analyze data, and write the research results.

1. Identify research topics: The researcher identifies a topic or study of interest to research. Often, the initial topic is narrowed to be more manageable.

2. Review of research: The researcher examines existing research to identify useful information and strategies for carrying out the study.

3. Selecting participants: The researcher must select participants to provide data collection. Qualitative participants are usually few in number relative to quantitative samples and are selectively chosen (i.e., not randomly selected).

4. Collecting data: The researcher collects data from participants. Qualitative data tend to be gathered from interviews, observations, or artifacts.

5. Analyzing data: The researcher interprets the themes and results of the collected data. Qualitative analysis is interpretive in nature, rather than statistical.

6. Reporting, evaluating, and interpreting research: The researcher summarizes and integrates the qualitative data in narrative form.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES

Table 6.1 provides a brief description of some of the most commonly utilized qualitative research approaches. Examining the table shows that the primary difference among the approaches is in the particulars of the social context examined and the participants selected. For example, some qualitative researchers focus on the characteristics of a single person or phenomenon, seeking to understand a single person or entity (case study); some focus in depth on a group's cultural patterns and perspectives to understand the relation between participants' behavior and their context (ethnography); some examine multiple cultures compared to one

CHAPTER 6 CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Steps in the Process of Research

Quantitative Characteristics
- Description and explanation-oriented
- Major role
- Justification for the research problem and specification for the need for the study
- Specific and narrow
- Measurable, observable data
- Predetermined instruments
- Numeric (numbered) data
- Large number of individuals
- Statistical analysis
- Description of trends, comparison of groups, or relationships among variables
- A comparison of results with predictions and past studies
- Standard and fixed
- Objective and unbiased

Qualitative Characteristics
- Exploratory and understanding-oriented
- Minor role
- Justification for the research problem
- General and broad
- Participants' experiences
- Emerging protocols
- Text or image data
- Small number of individuals or sites
- Text analysis
- Description, analysis, and thematic development
- The larger meaning of findings
- Flexible and emerging
- Reflective and biased

FIGURE 6.1
Characteristics of quantitative and qualitative research.


another (ethnology); some examine people's understanding of their daily activities (ethnoscenology); some derive theory using multiple steps of data collection and interpretation that link actions of participants to general social science theories (grounded theory); some ask what is the meaning of this experience for these participants (phenomenology); some seek what common understandings have emerged to give meaning to participants' interactions (symbolic interaction); some seek solutions or improvements of practical, educational problems (action research); and some seek to understand the past by studying documents, relics, and interviews (historical research). Overall, a common, generic name for these qualitative approaches is interpretative research.5

TABLE 6.1 Common Qualitative Research Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPROACH</th>
<th>KEY DEFINITION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>case study</td>
<td>What are the characteristics of this particular entity, phenomenon, or person?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnography</td>
<td>What are the cultural patterns and perspectives of this group in its natural setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnology</td>
<td>How do the origins, characteristics, and culture of different societies compare to one another?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnomethodology</td>
<td>How do people make sense of their everyday activities in order to believe in socially accepted views?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grounded theory</td>
<td>How is an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon grounded within a particular setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>phenomenology</td>
<td>What is the content and character of the events people experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbolic interaction</td>
<td>How do people construct meanings and share perspectives within social settings?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>action research</td>
<td>How do people construct social identities and social actions in the context of specific social situations and daily events?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>historical research</td>
<td>How do people functionally access and evaluate data in understanding or explaining past events?</td>
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As mentioned in Chapter 1, in this text we focus on four qualitative approaches: ethnography, historical research, grounded theory, and action research.

ETHNOGRAPHY

We focus first on ethnography because it is one of the most used and established qualitative research approaches. Ethnography seeks to describe and analyze all or part of the culture of a community by identifying and describing the participants' practices and beliefs. (It is distinct from ethnomethodology, which studies peoples' understandings of their own culture and activities.) In qualitative research, culture is viewed as the things humans have learned that influence their behavior. Context, or background, is an important aspect of interpreting qualitative research results.

The main characteristics of ethnography are shown in Figure 6.2. The seven basic characteristics shown in Figure 6.2 substantially overlap with other types of qualitative approaches. Other qualifying terms, such as "become intimately involved with participants," "being committed to represent the views of participants," "emphasizes on inductive not deductive," and "interpretation of data within a defined context," are commonly used descriptions by all qualitative researchers.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Historical research is the systematic collection and evaluation of data related to past occurrences for the purpose of describing causes, effects, or trends of those events. It helps to explain current events and to anticipate future ones. It is a common form of qualitative research.
The seven characteristics that mark a study as ethnographic are as follows:

- It is carried out in a natural setting, not in a laboratory.
- It involves intimate, face-to-face interaction with participants.
- It presents an accurate reflection of participants’ perspectives and behaviors.
- It uses inductive, interactive, and recursive data collection and analytic strategies to identify cultural theories.
- It uses multiple data sources, including both quantitative and qualitative data.
- It frames all human behavior and belief within a socio-political and historical context.
- It uses the concept of culture as a lens through which to interpret results.


In fact, until recently, it was the sole form recognized by theory. Historical research has most of the characteristics common to other forms of qualitative research, except that it has a retrospective focus, seeking to understand and describe past characters, events, and settings. It uses data collection and interpretation procedures similar to those used in other approaches, but its main, though not sole, method tends to be literature review.

Many current educational practices, theories, and issues can be better understood in light of past experiences. Issues of grading, cooperative learning, testing, and reading methods are not new in education, nor is cooperative learning an innovation of the 1970s, and a knowledge of their history can yield insight into the evolution of the current educational system as well as into practices and approaches that have been found to be ineffective or unfeasible. In fact, studying the history of education might lead one to believe that there is little new under the educational sun, although some practices seem to appear and disappear with regularity. For example, for more than 130 years individualized instruction and group instruction have seemingly taken turns being the favored approach of the day.

The steps involved in conducting a historical research study are similar to other types of research: identify a question or issue to examine; review the literature or pertinent relics, documents, diaries, and other data sources; select participants if appropriate; collect data; analyze and interpret the data; and produce a verbal synthesis of the findings or interpretations. In conducting a historical study, the researcher can neither manipulate nor control any of the variables. There is no way the researcher can affect events of the past; what has happened has happened. The researcher can, however, describe the documents used and provide bases for her interpretations. Not everyone may agree with these, but the researcher will have provided information about the bases of her reasoning and interpretations. These will need to be confronted by anyone criticizing the work.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative method that aims at generating a theory that explains, at a conceptual level, a process, an action, or a concept. The central focus in grounded theory is this generation of theory. The researcher begins with a research topic or situation that he seeks to understand. That is, the researcher asks, "What is happening in this situation and how can I provide a theory to explain it?" Note that the researcher initially identifies the main topic or situation to be examined, unlike many other qualitative research methods. The most common strategies used to carry out grounded theory are observation and interviews. The key to the success of grounded theory is the constant comparison method (see Glaser, 1965/1967), a strategy that "constantly compares" and integrates the data the researcher collects in numerous data collection forays, and that also eliminates redundant
results. The constant comparison is inductive; that is, the analysis shifts from specific information to broader, more inclusive understandings. Theory evolves during actual research, and it does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. As data are continually examined and narrowed, theoretical propositions emerge that develop and link to other propositions. The literature on the topic can be examined as needed. In an emergent study, the researcher probably won't know at the beginning what literature will later turn out to be relevant. As the data are examined and related to prior data, the grounded theorist narrows the data to identify the key aspects of the theory of interest. Eventually the researcher's interviews and observations will add link or no additional data, indicating diminishing returns in subsequent data gathering. At this point, when a theory will have been developed, the grounded theorist will likely end his data collection and constant comparison.

**ACTION RESEARCH**

Action research is a systematic inquiry done by teachers and other educational personnel such as counselors and administrators to collect and study data that can help them to both understand and improve their practice. In action research, educators reflect on their practice, identify areas that need improvement or understanding, collect data pertinent to the issue of interest, analyze the data, and try to determine whether the obtained results do in fact improve practice or understanding. This form of teacher research has emerged relatively recently and has been adopted in many school systems and subject area departments, and by individual teachers.

Action research is based on the view that teachers, as well as counselors, principals, and other school professionals, can serve as practical researchers who can help improve practice in school. More specifically, the following results are associated with action research:

- Encouraging changes in schools
- Empowering a democratic approach to education
- Empowering individuals through collaboration on projects
- Encouraging educators to reflect on their practice and have a "voice"
- Encouraging teachers to try new approaches to old problems
- Encouraging teachers to engage in professional growth
- Instilling in teachers the feeling that action research is a professional responsibility

Any teacher or school-based question, topic, or problem is pertinent to action research and may be the start of the process. Common action research topics start with questions such as these:

- How can I make this better?
- Would this be better if I . . . ?
- Will doing this likely improve students’ . . . ?
- Why does this approach not work as it should?

Although action research has gained support from educators, others do not view it as a legitimate form of research and inquiry. Many researchers view action research as an informal, rather than a more rigorous, approach to educational research. The practical, limited aspect of most action research, and the fact that teachers are usually the primary action researchers, lead

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to distinguishing "applied" or "action" research from "true" research. While this distinction has some validity, it is also true that action research serves an important role in improving schools and schooling.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PROCESS

The central focus of qualitative research studies is to provide understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants. To achieve this goal, qualitative research is guided by five general characteristics that cut across most types of qualitative studies. First, the sources of data for qualitative research are real-world situations, natural, non-manipulated settings. Researchers spend a great deal of time in the selected setting. Second, qualitative research data are descriptive. Data in the form of interview notes, observation records, documents, and field notes are the basis for analysis and interpretation. Numerical data are very rarely the main focus of a qualitative study. Third, qualitative research emphasizes a holistic approach, focusing on processes as well as final outcomes. The researcher is immersed in the details and specifics of the setting. It is the detailed recording of the processes occurring in the natural setting that provides the basis for understanding the setting, the participants, and their interactions. Without this immersion, the search for interpretation and understanding would elude the qualitative researcher. Fourth, qualitative data are analyzed inductively; that is, patterns and relationships are developed from collecting or observing multiple specific instances. Thus, the qualitative researcher does not impose an organizing structure or make assumptions about the relationships among the data prior to collecting evidence. As the data are analyzed, the researcher seeks specific pieces of data that can be generalized. He seeks to find patterns and common themes. The more data collected, the more likely that inductive analysis will be confirmed. Fifth, the researcher strives to describe the meaning of the finding from the perspective of the research participants, not of the researcher himself or herself.

Throughout this process, the focus is on the meanings that participants have identified in their own natural settings or contexts. This focus on the research context is very important in qualitative research because each research setting and its participants are viewed by the qualitative researcher as being unique, thus making the researcher's task one of describing participants' understanding of their own, unique reality.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Good qualitative research displays a number of characteristics. Qualitative approaches:

1. require researchers to take a holistic stance; they look at the overall context to obtain and guide their understanding.
2. require researchers to avoid making premature decisions or assumptions about the study. They typically wait until they are in the research context before making tentative decisions based on initial data analysis.
3. focus on individual, person-to-person interactions.
4. require that the researcher spend a great deal of time in the research setting with the participants.
5. require that the researcher have the opportunity of gathering data directly from the participants.
6. require that the researcher remain open to alternative explanations.
7. include a description of the role of the researcher and her or his biases or preferences in the research topic or research processes.
8. require clear information and detailed description about the study that includes the voices of the participants.
9. are based on the researcher's responsibility to obtain informed consent from participants and to ensure their ethical treatment.

10. focus on discovery and understanding, which require flexibility in the research design.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned that qualitative research can answer questions and illuminate participants' experiences in a way that quantitative research and its questions cannot. Rather than asking, "What percent of teachers and students in our state indicate enjoying school?" (you guessed it—a quantitative research question) the qualitative researcher asks, "What is the meaning of the way that students and teacher create a viable social setting in the classroom?"

Qualitative research questions encompass a range of topics, but most focus on participants' understanding of meanings and social life in a particular context. Note, however, that these general topics must necessarily be more focused to become useful and researchable questions. For example, the topic "What are the cultural patterns and perspectives of this group in its natural setting?" could be narrowed by asking, "What are the cultural patterns and perspectives of teachers during lunch in the teachers' room?" Similarly, the topic "How do people make sense of their everyday activities in order to behave in socially acceptable ways?" might be narrowed by asking, "How do rival gang members engage in socially accepted ways when interacting with each other during the school day?" The questions presented in Table 6.1 are general in nature to demonstrate the different qualitative approach. Clearly there are many ways to reduce these questions to make them viable and focused research questions.

In most cases, the focus of narrowing questions is on reducing aspects of the topic, because most researchers overestimate the conduct of the study. The following strategies suggest ways to reduce the scale of a qualitative study; which one or ones the researcher chooses will depend on the nature of the planned research and the available resources.

1. Narrow the topic or amount of the topic.
2. Narrow the audience to be addressed.
3. Narrow the number of participants to save time and analyses.
4. Examine the literature to determine the scale of the topic.
5. Look for potential problems during the early steps of the research.
6. Share the research work with a colleague.
7. Obtain the advice of more experienced qualitative researchers.

Ericson suggests four reasons why it is important to explore qualitative topics and questions:

1. Qualitative questions have the potential to illuminate the "invisibility of everyday life," that is, to make the familiar strange and therefore more examined and understood.
2. Often, a general or generic answer to a research question is not useful; what is needed is specific, concrete details to guide understanding in a particular setting.
3. It is important to know the local meanings that activities and practices have for the groups engaged in them. Different settings or contexts may seem to carry out the same activities and practices, but may actually be quite different. How direct teaching or whole language is practiced in different classrooms might differ quite markedly, although teachers in these classrooms would indicate that they were using direct teaching or whole language.

4. Groups of qualitative research studies can help the comparative understanding of different settings. That is, a study focused on a particular fifth-grade classroom can be compared to another particular fifth-grade classroom in terms of common and uncommon aspects. However, qualitative research is not well suited to answer questions about research effects.

Qualitative research topics (dissertation or otherwise) are usually more general and tentative than quantitative research topics, mainly because it is expected that a qualitative study will evolve in focus once the researcher is in the research setting and beginning to interact with the participants. This means that a proposed qualitative topic rarely provides the initial specificity of most quantitative topics or plans. However, it is important to note that the qualitative researcher does not enter the research setting with no idea of what the chosen study topic or research method will involve. To the contrary, all qualitative researchers have some idea or thought about their topic, even if it is sketchy and not fully developed.

Ultimately, a good research plan, as we discussed in Chapter 3, should answer the following questions, not necessarily in depth, but with some focus, rationale, and thought:

- What topics are you going to study?
- In what setting or context will you conduct the study?
- What kinds of data do you think you will collect?
- What methods do you plan to use?
- Why are you doing the study?
- What contribution might the study provide?

At the very least, the researcher must have some sense of the nature of the study to communicate information about the planned study to a doctoral adviser and/or to potential participants. As Yin notes:

> When Christopher Columbus went to Queen Isabella to ask for support for his "exploration" of the New World, he had to have some reason for asking for three ships (why not one? why not five?), and he had some rationale for going westward (why not north? why not south?). He also had some criteria for recognizing the New World when he actually encountered it. In short, his exploration began with some rationale and direction, even if its initial assumptions might later have been proved wrong.8

Another way to say this is that you have ideas and assumptions about your topic before you begin your study, but you have not entirely settled on the path you will take. Qualitative proposals are not fixed contracts that cannot be altered, but neither are they so brief and general that they convey little about the proposed study.

STEP 1: SELECTING A RESEARCH TOPIC OR ISSUE

The first step in qualitative research is to select a topic or issue to study. There is an unlimited number of useful and viable educational topics worthy of study. The following are a few examples suitable for educational qualitative research: "the quality of varied classroom procedures"; "the life of students in an urban first grade"; "the development of middle school teachers' instructional practices"; "how department chairs judge the quality of their teachers' teaching"; "the effectiveness of small student mathematics learning groups"; "the methods used to develop a schoolwide policy on cheating"; "the racial attitudes of elementary children"; and "how a five-year teacher's practice changes over one school year." One recent new domain of qualitative research topics derives from the inequity and needs of lower socioeconomic-status persons, ethnically diverse groups, persons with disabilities, and other advocacy groups. Often these individuals or groups develop topics focused on their own plight.

PART 2: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Note that topics tend to be generally stated. Each of these just listed would have to be narrowed to a manageable focus to study. This is a common practice in developing qualitative research topics. The qualitative researcher begins with an open-ended, broad research topic that will narrow and emerge as he learns more about the research participants, their thoughts, and their setting. The qualitative researcher depends heavily on information provided by participants during the research. Conversely, the quantitative researcher begins with a complete, narrowly stated research plan at the start of the research, and the study does not change throughout the entire research study. Thus, a qualitative researcher might explore the many factors included in the general research topic to understand them and then select some feature to investigate. As an exercise for yourself, select two of the general topics previously listed and for each, narrow it down until you have two more focused topics for each general topic.

To get a sense of the various ways qualitative researchers construct their research topics, examine qualitative journals such as International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice, Qualitative Sociology, Educational Researcher, American Psychologist, and Journal of Women's History.

Researchers may wonder, "Where should one expect the topic to be established in a qualitative research study?" To ask this question of a qualitative researcher is quite different from asking it of a quantitative researcher. As mentioned previously, for the most part, quantitative researchers narrowly plan their research topic, methods, variables, and strategies before they begin their study. They then implement their plan. Conversely, qualitative researchers do not narrowly predetermine their research methods before the study has begun.

The nature of qualitative research is such that it is viewed holistically based on complex phenomena that must be understood before analyzing. There likely will not be a defined problem statement until the qualitative researcher has begun to become immersed in the data. Recall that most aspects of qualitative research are in flux during its conduct, and the qualitative researcher seeks to refrain from prematurely making decisions about the outcome of the research, thus making it difficult to identify a specific topic early on.

WHAT ARE THE FUNCTIONS OF A RESEARCH TOPIC?

The researcher can use her research topic in a variety of ways. It can test existing knowledge to determine its viability. It can provide a voice for groups or individuals to be heard. It can identify new directions for research. It can help identify and examine gaps in educational practice and theory. And particularly pertinent for this text, it can help students develop their research knowledge and practice. Students often ask, "Where do research topics come from?" and "How can I find good topics?" As noted in Chapter 2, the most common sources of research topics are from testing existing theories, examining questions that plaque interest or curiosity, and carrying out replications, that is, conducting studies similar to existing studies. One often-foreseen source of research topics is a library search. However, such searches have two limitations for qualitative research topics. First, without having already identified and narrowed some form of a research topic, roaming among the stacks in search of literature is inefficient and time consuming. Second, some qualitative researchers prefer to immerse themselves into the research setting before examining the existing research. They try not to be influenced by the literature (such as the themes developed in other studies) too early in the research process.

Qualitative researchers ask open-ended, broad questions that keep the research topic open while collecting data from the study participants. Recall that qualitative researchers deal mainly with inductive reasoning, which depends on finding commonalities in the qualitative data. This is the typical approach used to develop research topics in qualitative research. Imagine a qualitative researcher who has a general topic to research. She knows that her topic needs to be narrowed so she calls on the participants to provide information that can help her understand and narrow the topic while spending time in the research setting.
Selecting a Topic in Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research simultaneously studies both a group of participants and the context or setting in which they interact. In selecting an ethnographic topic for study, the researcher must consider a number of issues. For example, although the topic does not have to be narrowly stated at the start of the study, some form of statement is needed to orient the study to professors, colleagues, or potential gatekeepers. Also, the beginning researcher should select a research topic of strong personal interest and carry out the study itself on a small scale, with a limited number of participants and a narrow research context. Remember that the researcher needs to be able to conduct the study in the participants' natural setting. The researcher must be able to build rapport and trust; there needs to be a sense of "intimacy" between the researcher and participants. Sometimes this is difficult to obtain. Also, the researcher must be able to stay in the setting over a period of time to gather data. Because of this, the researcher "sounds out" potential gatekeepers about the feasibility of doing the study in that context with those participants. Finally, the inexperienced ethnographic researcher should, if at all possible, work with a more seasoned colleague. These issues are all factors in selecting an ethnographic research topic.

Selecting a Topic in Historical Research

The purpose of historical research is, as in all qualitative research, to help understand a person or event by providing in-depth description and interpretation of the data. Clearly, a historical research study should not be undertaken to prove the researcher's prior beliefs or to support a pet position. One can easily verify almost any point of view by consciously or unconsciously "overlooking" evidence to the contrary. There are probably data available to support almost any position; the historical researcher's task is to weigh and interpret existing evidence in arriving at a tolerable description or conclusion. For example, one could cite data that would seemingly support the position that having more highly educated and trained teachers has led to increased school vandalism. One could do a historical study describing how requirements for teacher certification and rectification have increased over the years and how school vandalism has correspondingly increased. Of course, such a study would indicate very poor critical analysis, since two separate, independent sets of factors are probably responsible for each of these trends rather than one being the cause or effect of the other.

To avoid this sort of biased data collection and analysis, one should probably avoid topics about which one has strong feelings. It is a lot easier to be even handed and open minded about a topic when one is not emotionally involved. Worthwhile historical research topics are identified and evaluated in much the same way as topics for other types of qualitative research. The History of Education Quarterly is one special resource for acquainting researchers with the range of historical research studies that have been conducted and for suggesting future studies. Given the qualitative focus of historical research, it is important to formulate a manageable, well-defined topic to study. Otherwise, it is likely that an overwhelming amount of data will be collected, making it more difficult to analyze and synthesize the data and draw properly documented interpretations. On the other hand, a concern unique to historical research is the possibility that a problem will be selected for which insufficient data are available. Historical researchers cannot "create" historical data. They are limited to whatever data are already available. Thus, if insufficient data are available, the problem will be inadequately investigated. For example, a researcher may well have difficulty studying the influence of Charles Dickens's flat feet on the themes he chose to write about. Select topics less esoteric than Dickens's and his feet. There are plenty of better-documented historical topics to be studied.
SELECTING A TOPIC IN GROUNDED THEORY

Researchers in grounded theory also plan their approaches differently than do quantitative researchers. Qualitative researchers know before the study begins what the nature of the research will be, how the study will be carried out, what the characteristics of the sample will be, how data will be collected, and how it will be analyzed. That is not the case for qualitative researchers, who carry out their studies in an interactive manner. Their qualitative research develops and grows as it becomes involved in the phenomenon, context, or group of participants being studied.

Grounded theory researchers, like other qualitative researchers, select and develop research topics that they wish to explore and understand from the participants' perspectives. The researcher selects a topic that will lead to new insights and new understanding of what aspects of the topic are most important. The initial research topic is a working model that will be altered and narrowed as the researcher applies an iterative process that seeks to help make sense of the data provided by the research participants. The grounded theory approach involves a number of iterations with participants, during which the researcher continually examines the data to identify the key emerging ideas. Examples of topics are "A study of the process of career change of jobs among 18- to 20-year-old African American males" and "How does an inductively derived theory about career development explain a theoretical model of career development among non-English speakers?" Grounded theory research topics such as these are quite broad to provide the researcher an opportunity to examine and interact with the participants over time.

SELECTING A TOPIC IN ACTION RESEARCH

As stated previously, action research aims to improve or better understand aspects of classroom teaching practice. Action research is intended to be carried out by teachers and other professionals who are in close contact with students and their learning, such as counselors and administrators, to improve teaching and learning. The steps in action research are similar in some respects to other types of qualitative research, but one important difference is that the topic or issue studied is identified and carried out by the teacher or administrator. Also, the action research takes place in the teacher's own classroom.

A topic or question derives from a teacher's or administrator's need to understand or correct a problem. Teachers may commonly ask questions such as: "Can I make this better?" "Would it be better if I . . . ?" "Would doing this improve student learning?" "Why does this approach not work with . . . ?" and "How do students feel about my . . . ?" Action research topics are ones that interest or concern a teacher or administrator.

When selecting an action research topic, choose a narrowly defined question to examine, especially if you are a novice qualitative researcher. The topic must be both feasible and manageable. For example, it is better to examine a narrowed research question such as, "What are the effects of positive verbal feedback on middle school students' participation in class discussions?" rather than, "How can I increase student participation in class discussions?"

The teacher-researcher commonly finds it difficult to carry on action research in depth and over very long time periods. A teacher who wishes to conduct action research usually has to make his or her own time to do so, except when the school's teacher evaluation system builds in an opportunity.

We discuss action research thoroughly in Chapter 9.

To summarize, the following suggestions can help you choose a qualitative research topic: (1) select a manageable topic and don't overestimate your time and expertise; (2) choose a topic that is interesting to you; (3) choose a topic that you think is important; (4) be flexible when narrowing your topic; (5) work with a mentor who can help you state, plan, and conduct your research.
CHAPTER 6 CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

STEP 2: REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

Unlike quantitative researchers, who spend a great deal of time examining the research on their topic at the outset of a study, some qualitative researchers will delve deeply into their literature until their topic has emerged. As noted, a qualitative research focus emerges over time based on the data provided by the research participants. Qualitative researchers differ in their opinions on this issue. Some believe that too much emphasis on the examination of literature can bias or influence the research and prematurely narrow the focus of the intended topic prior to interaction with participants. In qualitative research, the research topic can change a number of times based on continually narrowing information. Thus, the research topic that ultimately evolves may not be identified until well into the research study. Because of this aspect of qualitative research, delving deeply into the literature is not always a fruitful undertaking, according to some researchers.

Others think that familiarity with or even immersion in the topic puts researchers in a particular frame of mind for beginning exploration. Inevitably, qualitative researchers will examine existing literature if only to demonstrate that their topic is viable and credible. This approach is especially true for beginning qualitative researchers who undoubtedly will be asked by their instructor to justify their topic. Also, the research topic and some pertinent literature may be very useful or necessary when dealing with potential gatekeepers and participants.

It is important to note a subtle distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. Quantitative researchers have research plans and procedures developed before beginning their study. Because qualitative studies are open-ended in their inquiry and plans and procedures emerge during the conduct of the study, their research follows the lead of the participants, unlike that of quantitative researchers. This means that different qualitative research studies can have varied approaches. One should not be surprised to find that some qualitative researchers will deal with many literature sources and some will use very few.

Given this perspective, in a real sense, the two starting steps in qualitative research—identifying an initial topic and reviewing the research literature—are typically necessary, but flexible. They are also influenced by the information gathered from participants. Another facet of this step is that reviewing the literature in qualitative studies is an ongoing process that will continue through data collection and analysis.

While the four types of qualitative research we are discussing are similar in a number of respects, there are important distinctions that bear noting. Building qualitative researchers should be aware of the differences when searching for literature and carrying out other research steps. For example, ethnography is the study of the cultural patterns and perspectives of a selected group. Historical research focuses mainly on events and personages from the past. Grounded theory focuses mainly on developing a theory. Action research focuses primarily on schools or classrooms to improve learning and teaching.

TYPES OF QUALITATIVE LITERATURE

As you have seen, qualitative research can be a flexible, inventive approach to research. Although specific types of research literature are tied to particular qualitative research topics, each researcher is free to consult a variety of literature sources. Ethnographic researchers seek settings in which the researcher can learn about the participants and the research setting, and may consult works by others who have worked in comparable contexts. Literature used in historical research may include artifacts, books, periodicals, diaries, videotapes, and transcripts of face-to-face discussion.

Grounded theory comes from the inductive (from the bottom up) analysis of data as the research is conducted. The theory is grounded in the data and there are no prior ideas about

what that emerging theory will state. Other themes in the literature may be referred to toward the end of the study, after the theory has been developed. Action researchers, too, may use very little formal literature, relying on other teachers' experiences with the intended topic.

In a general sense, we can provide examples of particular types of literature that are frequently associated with the following qualitative approaches:

- Ethnography—sociological books and articles
- Historical—books and artifacts
- Grounded theory—theses in related literature to validate the grounded theory process used
- Action research—educational journals

EXAMPLES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOPICS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

To give you some sense of the nature of qualitative research, we provide here the written reports of two qualitative research studies. Understand that these two examples represent only a tiny portion of the richness of qualitative studies. We strongly suggest that you examine the wealth of research for yourself.

In this chapter and in chapters 7 and 8 we will examine these two research reports based on the six general steps in the research process. As you read them, observe the use of common qualitative research terms and processes. In the first study look for terms and processes that define qualitative research:

abstract, observation, participants, methodology, procedures, oral questioning, small number of participants, interviews, questioning—second interview, discussion, implications, describes with words not numbers

Note also that, in this study, the researcher also reported on quantitative methods in Table 1 (repeated in Chapter 7). As we shall see subsequently, there are many research studies that rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain a richer perspective than can be obtained by either method alone.

THE EXPRESSION OF CARE IN THE ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY OF BOYS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the expression of care in the rough and tumble play of boys. The study involved a total of 12 boys ranging in age from 6 to 12 years. The boys were observed in their natural setting, playing in a playground, and their play was recorded using video cameras. The data collected included the boys' verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as their interactions with other children and adults. The data were analyzed using qualitative research methods, and the results indicated that the boys expressed care in a variety of ways, including physical contact, shared play, and verbal encouragement. The findings suggest that rough and tumble play is an important medium for developing caring relationships among boys.

The research topic is short and fairly general. This is typical in qualitative research, since the topic evolves during the study.

CHAPTER 6 CHARACTERS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Research Topic

The expression of care in the rough and tumble play of boys.

Introduction

Play has never been universally defined in the literature. Perhaps no single definition can be determined, as there are as many different interpretations of play as there are cultures in the world. Calvsmann (1979) suggests that play is supposed to be fun and something to be "felt," not necessarily "done." This qualitative study focuses on a specialized type of play referred to as rough and tumble play (R&T), and as noticed in pedagogical theory (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969) rough and tumbling begins in the preoperational stage and continues into concrete operations, following a predictable developmental path. From the Piagetian perspective, R&T contains both physical and emotional elements, and precedes games with rules. Piagetian theory suggests that play functions to create symbols and schemas needed for an idiosyncratic view of the world. Finally, cognitive development provides the foundation for play, including exercise play, symbolic play, games with rules, and games of construction (Parratt, 1932). All of which are rarely visible during R&T. Yet Vygotsky (Cole, John, Selman, Schirner, & Stoverman, 1979), plays a more function of culture than it is a developmental process. Vygotsky supports the notion that play is an attempt for the child to gain mastery over his or her destiny and function within the culture. From the Vygotskian perspective, play is a tool used as the child becomes a participant in his or her culture. Therefore, R&T is a function of culture and is learned behavior necessary for membership. Despite the above interpretations, the literature on R&T is non-existent. This may be due in part to the fact that research has focused more on the negative effects aggressive play has on behavior, rather than any potentially positive cooperative or social factors (Cooper, 1979).

Rough and Tumble Play

Rough and tumble play was brought to popular notice by Harlow (1941) research with chimpanzees. Harlow described the characteristics of R&T as running, chasing, hitting, pushing, wrestling, open-hand slap, pulling, and play-fighting. Children engage in rough and tumble play in order to learn how to capture their victim. Those who engage in wrestling as part of R&T do not intend to hurt their partner. There is much slapping or pushing in R&T that remains merely playful, yet strong play is the origin of injury. These are highly driven and played, yet sometimes, aggressive behavior. Harlow also described that should include the "play-fight." Harlow described for play, and children engage in rough and tumble play to learn how to communicate with their play partners. In aggressive behavior includes the infliction of bodily harm and is characterized by visible signs of excitement and lasting anger. Bigelow (1976) concluded that the major characteristics and strategies of R&T discussed by Harlow also applied to children playing in a nursery school. While R&T is observed equally in both genders in the Freigeist Transactional Interaction Model, and in the female group, the boys were found to engage in more aggressive behavior than the girls. In one of his studies, Winslow (1976) found that boys were more likely to engage in R&T behaviors and that they engaged in more aggressive behavior than the girls. R&T behaviors become more frequent by the end of the first year and by age 3 R&T behaviors become less frequent. The most frequent games were such as "tag," "red Rover," and "Hide and Go Seek." R&T behaviors have become less frequent by the end of the first year and by age 3 R&T behaviors become less frequent. The most frequent games were such as "tag," "red Rover," and "Hide and Go Seek." It is clear that children who participate in R&T are more physically active and have higher energy levels. In addition, they have a better sense of humor, and they are more likely to cooperate with others during play. R&T is positively correlated with social problem-solving ability and academic achievement.
among boys. Social competence is developed through alternating role taking, negotiating given
tasks, deciding who follows and who leads, and exploring social dominance. Furthermore, ac-
nademic achievement is related to social adjustment and competence in problem solving, which are
both referred during Re&T (Fuligni, 1994).

Caring in Re&T

Necklaus (1992) describes "to care" and "to be cared for" as basic human needs. Caring does not
adhere to a prescribed formula, making it difficult for schools to assist children in learning to care
for other human beings. In addition, gender- and culture-based factors must be considered when
teaching children to care. It is apparent that boys and girls have different perspectives on inti-
mate relations and different interpretations with regard to connection and expression of care
(Boddings, 1992). Elementary schools are often governed by the feminine perspective that con-
siders pushing, hitting, bowing, or games of chase to be inappropriate behavior.

Aggression and Re&T

All physical activity is inherently risky (Egan, 1981). Re&T has the appearance of being aggres-
sive, which explicitly part of its appeal to young boys. Women are more likely to view Re&T as ag-
gressive, while boys are likely to say it is play (Connor, 1988). The underlying observer of Re&T
may see tripping, pushing, or hitting as fighting. Indeed, one definition of Re&T is "play fighting" (Shurton Jones, 1976). Play theorists have attempted to explain the difference between Re&T and aggres-
sion. Dornbluth (1976) theorizes that what is actually being observed is fighting, cooperation, exchanging, mutual sharing, and concern for one another masked as aggression. He states that the Re&T player is saying, "I trust you to push me, trip me, all on me, and if I get hurt you will care for me" (Dornbluth, 1976, p. 239). Research has documented that Re&T is a distinct

Friendship and Re&T

The Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1999) defines "friend" as "one wished to another
by affection or esteem." The Oxford American Dictionary (1996) further defines friendship as a
relationship. Other definitions of friendship include such aspects as intimate emotional support,
voluntary reciprocity, social, and sexual (Kroedel & Ladd, 1990). Lawton, Connor, and Parker
(1998) found essential ingredients of friendships to include intimacy, affection, and ego support.
Many researchers agree that the concept of friendship is a social behavior that involves reaching,
shared meaning, and that it does not necessarily come naturally (Egan, 1981; Newmann et al.,
1976; Kuhl, 1996; Lawton, 1997). The factors in which children need to build this knowledge is that
further enhances their social skills and leads to stable friendships (Lawton, 1997).

Comments

The title of the article is the research topic. The abstract provides a good overview and lead-in
to the study, including a rationale for the study and a brief description of data collection. The
introduction section contains a number of articles from the literature that provide an overview
for study. This report has an apprachically large literature review section. This is perfectly all right,
although it is not common. The introduction provides a general context for the study's central
question: Do boys use Re&T to express care for one another and to develop friendships?
THE DISLOCATED TEXTILE WORKER IN RURAL ALABAMA: A PORTRAIT

Sharon G. Lankford-Rice

Abstract

This is a study that delves into the attitudes of the rural Alabama textile worker at the point of being laid off. The methodology and findings are discussed and a personal interview-researched from a former dislocated worker concerning her feelings, attitudes, and aspirations on how the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program has impacted her life and career.

Introduction

The sense of urgency is almost palpable as the guests enter the local train station. The workers are filing into the room in short time later, at first in small groups and then in larger ones. Their comments are hurriedly whispered to each other and too low to be overhead. Some of the workers laugh nervously and others remain grim faced. Almost all of the workers in this group are women aged anywhere from 30 to 65 and some look much older than their questionnaires indicate; however, they all have one thing in common regardless of age, background, gender, and marital status—they’ve all just been laid off from either the only job they have ever held. This is the first question of the guest that groups before they have asked and future groups all asked to ask well, "What do we do now? How are we going to make a living? I didn’t know how to be a mother/how to be a father..."

The guests have come to help the workers find answers to their questions and hopefully to help them to their betterment. The author’s work is based on the premise that the knowledge and skills that have been successfully developed and sustained in the local training programs will be able to help the dislocated workers leave their training centers with a plan of action formulated in their heads and a renewed sense of hope for life and work. The guests are representatives from local agencies such as the Employment Security, Development Adjustment, and other local training programs, who make up what is called a Rapid Response Team.

The team of these workers in a factory situated in a small town, they visit the clothing facility and other similar facilities in the area concerning unemployment. As a member of this panel, we offer them company to create a guide for local residents at a representative of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) program, with an issue of the benefits of training and education to groups of workers just like this one. The research of this article focused on the experiences and attitudes of workers in textile plants in rural Alabama.

This is just one of many meetings that have been arranged for this particular company. It is a local textile plant with well over 250 employees employed on the first, second, and third shifts. These workers are considered lucky in that they have been given notice of the closing and will receive a severance package. Many other plants in the area have simply locked up the plant and ended their weekend shutdown leaving their workers to discover locked doors, and bounced paychecks on the Monday morning.

While all the agencies play an important role in the dislocated workers' life, one agency that delivers a training program performs a very vital role in training the unemployed worker in a new capacity. The North Alabama Skills Center, JTPA or Job Training Partnership Act has trained over 1000 dislocated workers from 1996-1998 through the local delivery agent. The agency provides training dollars, casework management, career guidance, and moral support to the workers who choose to take advantage of the unique opportunity the program offers. The North Alabama Skills Center in the delivery of the JTPA program services has made a tremendous impact on the people in the community it serves. The researcher worked in the capacity of coordinator of the North Alabama Skills Center in the northeast corner of Alabama for 11 years delivering services to the dislocated workers of that region.

This article will present a review of literature concerning women in the workplace and dislocated workers specifically relating to women's issues in the training arena, a description of the methodology, the findings surrounding the program which emerged through the study and, finally, an ethnographic case study of one dislocated worker and the impact of JTPA on her life.

Review of Related Literature

Women

The JTPA program was designed to serve many different groups of people in a structured training program. Originally the focus was on the economically disadvantaged, particularly those who needed supportive services while a mixed combination of training services (Bow & Walker, 1980). The Bow and Walker study showed that emphasis on a high number of low cost placements and displaced program focus toward women. Specifically national programs for females have been limited to a very small percentage of training dollars in JTPA. While that may have been true for the greater portion of the US rural Alabama too had to shift training focus to female oriented training as a result of the large number of women being laid-off due to the loss of the textile industry. While non-traditional training was offered to the displaced workers in this southern state very low speed for the choice. The General Accounting Office (GAO) in 1989 reported that women nationwide were more often trained in traditionally female oriented occupations such as clerical work and secretarial positions than any other type of training

However, Packer discovered in her study of four JTPA training sites in middle America that a significant number of women entering JTPA training programs chose non-traditional curriculums for employment. The factors that appeared to contribute to the success of these women were JTPA make workers who brought their experiences to the participants, female mentors, and customized training to accommodate the non-traditional choice. One reason for the lack of success was the lack of supportive services such as child care for women. One problem with training choices in JTPA that have been described in highlighted study in 1986 study is women in low paying non-technical occupations who often face discriminatory practices and attitudes and who lack a strong supportive services system. Midill and 1986 study showed that only one site studied out of 13 used its entire supportive services budget of 1.5% to provide adequate supportive services to women and other participants.

The literature shows that women who have no supportive system in place run the high risk of dropping out of the training and not taking full advantage of the program. The North Alabama Skills Center has a strong supportive system in place that is designed to be "cushy to grow" in the training arena. A case manager is assigned from day one to the participant and stays with the client until he/she graduates from the program and finds a job. A major responsibility of the case manager is to help the client search for employment in the client training field. Once employment is secured, the client is then tracked for 13 weeks to calculate retention rates.

Dislocated Workers

The dislocated worker has become a large area of focus in the JTPA program. Due to the high number of plant closings around the nation, the federal government enacted EDWIA (Economic Dislocation and Work Adjustment Act) to replace Title III services under JTPA in 1988. Upon enactment the amount spent on remaining dislocated workers jumped from $173.4 million in
CHAPTER 6  CHARACTERISTICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

1987 to $246.5 million in 1988 (GAO, 1990). Prior to 1980 and theTestData replacement act, services were generally provided to Title III consumers however, the Title II or placement assistance which comprised more than 80% of the services rendered. Fewer than half of the participants received occupational skills training and fewer than 25% received any supportive services. It was also indicated that fewer older displaced workers aged 55 and older and fewer less educated workers were enrolled in the program. This study revealed that 69% of the participants were placed in jobs; however, the wage at placement was less than their previous wages had been (GAO, 1987). While it would appear that placing workers below their previous standard of pay may indicate unsuccessful rates, another study conducted revealed that while no significant differences existed for those who undertook short training programs, the workers themselves felt they had gained valuable training that would assist them in their future job search efforts. Most of these training programs were GED, basic skills, or short occupational curriculum and did provide wider employment options for the displaced workers.

The majority of those workers studied stated they would go through the programs again even though many returned to manufacturing jobs at substantially lower wages than before their dislocation (Merrifield, 1991). Unfortunately in rural areas, manufacturing jobs are usually the highest paying positions in close proximity to the workers’ homes. Too many times it is a matter of quality of life rather than, free choice that brings the workers back to the factory in assembly work.

It is imperative that displaced workers have the time necessary to train and strong cooperative efforts be made to assist the displaced worker to place her back in the job market. Naylor in a 1989 study made recommendations to empower the abilities of the local educational structures (JTBA included) to serve the needs of the displaced worker. Some of those recommendations were to develop programs that are comprehensive, link programs with public and private agencies, to have aggressive managers who are closely aligned with local employers and who are dynamic in advertising the programs along with promoting the participants.

The review of literature revealed that displaced workers are very likely to return to the workforce with or without new skills, but do not regret any time spent in training regardless of the outcome. While some would prefer to have employment in fields other than their previous fields, the workers are grateful to have had the opportunity to learn new skills they feel will help them in future endeavors. The North Alabama Skills Center has made learning new skills a reality for the displaced workers in the rural community it serves.

The researcher has worked for years interviewing and retaining displaced workers and heard the same sentiments expressed time and time again. Regardless of bis/gender, job status, or gender, displaced workers have envied similar feelings. The researcher was interested in categorizing these attitudes to come to a richer understanding and design “help” programs geared specifically for the workers. To achieve these objectives, an ethnographic study applied the most appropriate form for such categorization. Each worker may have expressed similar feelings but each individual lent a different perspective on these comparable experiences. In order to capture the complex of each worker’s circumstances, it was necessary to use a method that adequately allowed the workers to freely express their sentiments rather than just a method that allowed them to check off responses that did not truly express the depth and breadth of their emotions.

Comments

The abstract is somewhat shorter than that of the prior example. There was much less literature examined, and most of the literature is aimed at allowing readers to understand the context in which the study takes place. The tone of the writing is much more concise and rich than the prior example, describing loss of job, dislocation, and other difficulties related to JTBA. This study is an example of a qualitative research topic that exemplifies studies of inequities relating to race, gender, and class that face participants.

We will continue to examine these two qualitative examples in chapters 7 and 8 as we study and describe the remaining four qualitative research steps: selecting participants, collecting data, analyzing and interpreting data, and reporting and evaluating research.