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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 assumptions and interpretive frameworks hold qualitative research together. To describe these frameworks, qualitative researchers use terms—*constructivist, interpretivist, feminist, postmodernist,* and so forth. Within these assumptions and through these frameworks 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 have the common task of 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. Not all characteristics are present in all qualitative projects, but many are.

The 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 (through specific approaches such as narrative, phenomenology, and others). 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. This process entails preliminary considerations, steps in the process, and overall considerations used

throughout the process. Within these aspects, qualitative researchers need to anticipate and plan for potential ethical issues. These issues arise during many phases of the research process. 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 discussed in the remainder of the book.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What are the key characteristics of qualitative research?
- What types of problems are best suited for qualitative inquiry?
- What research skills are required to undertake this type of research?
- How do researchers design a qualitative study?
- What types of ethical issues need to be anticipated during the process of research?
- What is a model structure for 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; 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. Other authors advance a definition. The evolving definition by Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2000, 2005, 2011) in their SAGE *Handbook of Qualitative Research* conveys the ever-changing nature of qualitative inquiry from social construction, to interpretivism, and on to social justice in the world. I include their latest definition here:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research 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 field notes, 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, 2011, 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 its ability to transform the world.

As an applied research methodologist, my working definition of qualitative research incorporates many of the Denzin and Lincoln elements, but it provides greater emphasis on the design of research and the use of distinct approaches to inquiry (e.g., ethnography, narrative). My definition is as follows:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing 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 both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change.

Notice in this definition that I place emphasis on the *process* of research as flowing from philosophical assumptions, to interpretive 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, or others.

It is helpful to move from a more general definition to specific characteristics found in qualitative research. I believe that the characteristics have evolved over time, and they certainly do not present a definitive set of elements. But a close examination of the characteristics mentioned in major books in the field shows some common threads. Examine Table 3.1 for three 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, and the reflexivity or "presence" of the researchers in the accounts they present. 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 often 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, such as in survey research. Instead, qualitative researchers gather up-close information by actually talking directly to people and seeing them behave and act within their context. In the natural setting, the researchers have face-to-face interaction over time.

- Researcher as key instrument. The qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants. They may use an instrument, but it is one designed by the researcher using open-ended questions. They do not tend to use or rely on questionnaires or instruments developed by other researchers.

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

- Complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic. Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the "bottom up," by organizing the data inductively 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. Researchers also use deductive thinking in that they build themes that are constantly being checked against the data. The inductive-deductive logic process means that the qualitative researcher uses complex reasoning skills throughout the process of research.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Research

Characteristics	LeCompte & Schensul (1999)	Hatch (2002)	Marshall & Rossman (2010)
Is conducted in a natural setting (the field), a source of data for close interaction	Yes	Yes	Yes
Relies on the researcher as key instrument in data collection		Yes	
Involves using multiple methods	Yes		Yes
Involves complex reasoning going between inductive and deductive	Yes	Yes	Yes
Focuses on participants' perspectives, their meanings, their multiple subjective views	Yes	Yes	
Is situated within the context or setting of participants/sites (social/political/historical)	Yes		Yes
Involves an emergent and evolving design rather than tightly prefigured design		Yes	Yes
Is reflective and interpretive (i.e., sensitive to researcher's biographies/social identities)			Yes
Presents a holistic, complex picture		Yes	Yes

● 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. The participant meanings further suggest multiple perspectives on a topic and diverse views. This is why a theme developed in a qualitative report should reflect multiple perspectives of the participants in the study.

● 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 be altered, and the individuals studied and the sites visited may be modified during the process of conducting the study. The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and engage in the best practices to obtain that information.

● Reflexivity. Researchers "position themselves" in a qualitative research study. This means that researchers convey (i.e., in a method section, in an introduction, or in other places in a study) their background (e.g., work experiences, cultural experiences, history), how it informs their interpretation of the information in a study, and what they have to gain from the study. As Wolcott (2010) said:

> Our readers have a right to know about us. And they do not want to know whether we played in the high school band. They want to know what prompts our interest in the topics we investigate, to whom we are reporting, and what we personally stand to gain from our study. (p. 36)

● 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 cannot be easily 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 always separate what people say from the place where 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 the processes that people experience, why they 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 A QUALITATIVE STUDY REQUIRES FROM US

What does it take to engage in this form of research? To undertake qualitative research requires a strong commitment to study a problem and its demands of time and resources. Qualitative research keeps good company with the most rigorous quantitative approaches, 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 and pondering 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. These guidelines complicate telling others how one plans a study and how others might judge it when the study is completed.

THE PROCESS OF DESIGNING A QUALITATIVE STUDY

There is no agreed upon structure for how to design a qualitative study. Books on qualitative research vary in their suggestions for design. You may recall from the introduction that *research design* means the plan for conducting the study. Some authors believe that by reading a study, discussing

the procedures, and pointing out issues that emerge, 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 to help design a study (see Morse & Richards, 2002), or to seek guidance from a "how to" book (see Hatch, 2002). I am not sure whether I write exactly from a "how to" perspective; I see my approach as 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.

I can share, however, how I think about designing a qualitative study. It can be conveyed in three components: preliminary considerations that I think through prior to beginning a study, the steps I engage in during the conduct of the study, and the elements that flow through all phases of the process of my research.

Preliminary Considerations

There are certain design principles that I work from when I design my own qualitative research studies. I find that qualitative research generally falls within the process of the scientific method, with common phases whether one is writing qualitatively or quantitatively. The scientific method can be described as including the problem, the hypotheses (or questions), the data collection, the results, and the discussion. 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. I like the concept of *methodological congruence* advanced by Morse and Richards (2002)—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. When engaging in the design of a qualitative study, I believe that the inquirer tends to follow these interconnected parts of the research process.

Several aspects of a qualitative project vary from study to study, and I am making preliminary decisions about what will be emphasized. For example, stances on the use of the literature vary widely, as does the emphasis 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 in qualitative research. 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 rigorous qualitative investigations (Barbour, 2000). Another consideration in qualitative research is the writing format for the qualitative project. It varies considerably from scientific-oriented approaches, to literary 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.

Finally, I also consider my own background and interests and what I bring to research. Researchers have a personal history that situates them as inquirers. They also have an orientation to research and a sense of personal ethics and political stances that inform their research. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) refer to the researchers as a "multicultural subject" (p. 12) and view the history, traditions, and conceptions of self, ethics, and politics as a starting point for inquiry.

Steps in the Process

With these preliminary considerations in place, I begin by acknowledging the broad *assumptions* that bring me to qualitative inquiry, and the *interpretive* lens that I will use. In addition, I bring a *topic* or a substantive area of investigation, and have reviewed the *literature* about the topic and can confidently say 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 or gap in the literature or past investigations on a topic, or both. 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, I will ask *open-ended research questions,* wanting to listen to the participants I am studying and shape the questions after I "explore" by talking with a few individuals. I refrain from assuming

the role of the expert researcher with the "best" questions. My questions will change and become more refined during the process of research to reflect an increased understanding of the problem. Furthermore, I will collect a *variety of sources of data* including information in the form of "words" or "images." I like to think in terms of four basic sources of qualitative information: interviews, observations, documents, and audio-visual materials. Certainly, new sources emerge that challenge this traditional categorization. Where do we place sounds, e-mail messages, and social networking? Unquestionably, the backbone of qualitative research is extensive collection of data, typically from multiple sources of information. Further, I collect data using these sources based on open-ended questions without much structure and by observing and collecting documents (and visual materials) without an agenda of what I hope to find. After organizing and storing my data, I *analyze* them by carefully masking the names of respondents, and I engage in the perplexing (and "lonely" if we are the sole researcher) exercise of trying to make sense of the data. I *analyze* the qualitative data working inductively from particulars to more general perspectives, whether these perspectives are called codes, categories, themes, or dimensions. I then work deductively to gather evidence to support the themes and the interpretations. 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 broader and broader categories. Recognizing the highly interrelated set of activities of data collection, analysis, and report writing, I intermingle these stages and find myself collecting data, analyzing another set of data, and beginning to write my report. I remember working on a qualitative case study (see Appendix F, Asmussen & Creswell, 1995) as interviewing, analyzing, and writing the case study—all interconnected processes, not distinct phases in the process. Also, as I write, I experiment with many *forms of narrative,* such as making metaphors and analogies, developing matrices and tables, and using visuals to convey simultaneously breaking down the data and reconfiguring them into new forms. I might layer my analysis into increasing levels of abstractions from codes, to themes, to the interrelationship of themes, to larger conceptual models. I will *(re)present* these data, partly based on participants' perspectives and partly based on my own interpretation, never clearly escaping a personal stamp on a study. In the end, I *discuss* the findings by comparing my findings with my personal views, with extant literature, and with emerging models that seem to adequately convey the essence of the findings.

At some point I ask, "Did we (I) get the story 'right'?" (Stake, 1995), knowing that there are no "right" stories, only multiple stories. Perhaps qualitative studies have no endings, only questions (Wolcott, 1994b). I also

seek to have my account resonate with the participants, to be an accurate reflection of what they said. So I engage in *validation* strategies, often multiple strategies, which include confirming or triangulating data from several sources, having my study reviewed and corrected by the participants, and employing other researchers to review my 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 my study. Standards for assessing the quality of qualitative research are available (Howe & Eisenhardt, 1990; Lincoln, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 2010). 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 (e.g., 25 hours observing). 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 (or others) addressed in this book. Use of a recognized approach to research enhances the rigor and sophistication of the research design. It also provides some means to evaluate the qualitative study. Use of an approach means that the researcher identifies and defines the approach, cites studies that employ it, and follows the procedures outlined in the approach. Certainly, the approach taken in the study may not exhaustively cover all of the elements of the approach. 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 or concept being explored. 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 that of 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, for example, 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 interrelated 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 a peer or external auditor of the account.

- 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 analysis 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 analyzed in terms of exploring 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, and to what they expect to obtain from conducting the research. 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 addresses in the study all of the ethical issues mentioned earlier in this chapter that thread through all phases of the research study.

Elements in All Phases of the Research

Throughout the slow process of collecting data and analyzing them, I shape the narrative—a narrative that assumes different forms from project to project. I will tell a story that unfolds over time. I will present the study following the traditional approach to scientific research (i.e., problem, question, method, findings). Throughout these different forms, I find it important to talk about my background and experiences, and how they have shaped my interpretation of the findings. I let the voices of participants speak and carry the story through dialogue, perhaps dialogue presented in Spanish with English subtitles.

Throughout all phases of the research process I try to be sensitive to *ethical* considerations. These are especially important as I negotiate entry to the field site of the research; involve participants in the study; gather personal, emotional data that reveal the details of life; and ask participants to give considerable time to the 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, 2010) 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.

Ethical Issues During All Phases of the Research Process

During the process of planning and designing a qualitative study, researchers need to consider what ethical issues might surface during the study and to plan how these issues need to be addressed. A common misconception is that these issues only surface during data collection. They arise, however, during several phases of the research process, and they are ever expanding in scope as inquirers become more sensitive to the needs of participants, sites, stakeholders, and publishers of research. One way to examine these issues is to consider the catalogue of possibilities such as provided by Weis and Fine (2000). They ask us to consider ethical considerations involving our roles as insiders/outsiders to the participants; assessing issues that we may be fearful of disclosing; establishing supportive, respectful relationships without stereotyping and using labels that participants do not embrace; acknowledging whose voices will be represented in our final study; and writing ourselves into the study by reflecting on who we are and the people we study. In addition, as summarized by Hatch (2002), we need to be sensitive to vulnerable populations, imbalanced power relations, and placing participants at risk.

My preferred approach in thinking about ethical issues in qualitative research is to examine them as they apply to different phases of the research process. Important recent books provide useful insight into how they array by phases, such as found in writings by Lincoln (2009), Mertens

and Ginsberg (2009), and the APA (2010), as well as in my own writings (Creswell, 2012). As shown in Table 3.2, ethical issues in qualitative research can be described as occurring prior to conducting the study, at the beginning of the study, during data collection, in data analysis, in reporting the data, and in publishing a study. In this Table I also present some possible solutions to the ethical issues so that these can be actively written into a research design or plan.

Prior to conducting a study it is necessary to gather college or university approval from the institutional review board for the data collection involved in the study. Equally important is to examine standards for ethical conduct of research available from professional organizations, such as the American Historical Association, the American Sociological Association, the International Communication Association, the American Evaluation Association, the Canadian Evaluation Society, the Australasian Evaluation Society, and the American Educational Research Association (Lincoln, 2009). Local permissions to gather data from individuals and sites also need to be obtained at an early stage in the research, and interested parties and gatekeepers can assist in their endeavor. Sites should not be chosen that have a vested interest in the outcomes of the study. Also, at this early stage, authorship should be negotiated among researchers involved in the qualitative study, if more than one individual undertakes the research. The APA (2010) has useful guidelines for negotiating authorship and how it might be accomplished.

Beginning the study involves initial contact with the site and with individuals. It is important to disclose the purpose of the study to the participants. This is often stated on an informed consent form completed for college/university institutional review board purposes. This form should indicate that participating in the study is voluntary and that it would not place the participants at undue risk. Special provisions are needed (e.g., child and parent consent forms) for sensitive populations. Further, at this stage, the researcher needs to anticipate any cultural, religious, gender, or other differences in the participants and the sites that need to be respected. Recent qualitative writings have made us aware of this respect, especially for indigenous populations (LaFrance & Crazy Bull, 2009).

For example, as American Indian tribes take over the delivery of services to their members, they have reclaimed their right to determine what research will be done and how it will be reported in a sensitive way to tribal cultures and charters.

We have also become more sensitive to potential issues that may arise in collecting data, especially through interviews and observations. Researchers need to seek permission to conduct research on-site and convey to gatekeepers or individuals in authority how their research will provide the least disruption

Table 3.2 Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research

Where in the Process of Research the Ethical Issue Occurs	Type of Ethical Issue	How to Address the Issue
Prior to conducting the study	• Seek college/university approval on campus • Examine professional association standards • Gain local permission from site and participants • Select a site without a vested interest in outcome of study • Negotiate authorship for publication	• Submit for institutional review board approval • Consult types of ethical standards that are needed in professional areas • Identify and go through local approvals; find gatekeeper to help • Select site that will not raise power issues with researchers • Give credit for work done on project; decide on author order
Beginning to conduct the study	• Disclose purpose of the study • Do not pressure participants into signing consent forms • Respect norms and charters of indigenous societies • Be sensitive to needs of vulnerable populations (e.g., children)	• Contact participants and inform them of general purpose of study • Tell participants that they do not have to sign form • Find out about cultural, religious, gender, and other differences that need to be respected • Obtain appropriate consent (e.g., parents, as well as children)
Collecting data	• Respect the site and disrupt as little as possible • Avoid deceiving participants • Respect potential power imbalances and exploitation of participants (e.g., interviewing, observing) • Do not "use" participants by gathering data and leaving site without giving back	• Build trust, convey extent of anticipated disruption in gaining access • Discuss purpose of the study and how data will be used • Avoid leading questions; withhold sharing personal impressions; avoid disclosing sensitive information • Provide rewards for participating

Where in the Process of Research the Ethical Issue Occurs	Type of Ethical Issue	How to Address the Issue
Analyzing data	• Avoid siding with participants (going native) • Avoid disclosing only positive results • Respect the privacy of participants	• Report multiple perspectives; report contrary findings • Assign fictitious names or aliases; develop composite profiles
Reporting data	• Falsifying authorship, evidence, data, findings, conclusions • Do not plagiarize • Avoid disclosing information that would harm participants • Communicate in clear, straightforward, appropriate language	• Report honestly • See APA (2010) guidelines for permissions needed to reprint or adapt work of others • Use composite stories so that individuals cannot be identified • Use language appropriate for audiences of the research
Publishing study	• Share data with others • Do not duplicate or piecemeal publications • Complete proof of compliance with ethical issues and lack of conflict of interest, if requested	• Provide copies of report to participants and stakeholders; share practical results; consider website distribution; consider publishing in different languages • Refrain from using the same material for more than one publication • Disclose funders for research; disclose who will profit from the research

Sources: Adapted from APA, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Lincoln, 2009; Mertens & Ginsberg, 2009.

to the activities at the site. The participants should not be deceived about the nature of the research, and, in the process of providing data (e.g., through interviews, documents, and so forth), should be appraised on the general nature of the inquiry. We are more sensitive today about the nature of the interview process, and how it creates a power imbalance through a hierarchical relationship often established between the researcher and the participant. This potential power imbalance needs to be respected, and building trust and avoiding leading questions help to remove some of this imbalance. Also, the simple act of collecting data may contribute to "using" the participants and the site for the personal gain of the researcher, and strategies such as reward might be used to create reciprocity with participants and sites.

In analyzing the data, certain ethical issues also surface. Because qualitative inquirers often spend considerable time at research sites, they may lose track of the need to present multiple perspectives and a complex picture of the central phenomenon. They may actually side with the participants on issues, and only disclose positive results that create a Pollyanna portrait of the issues. This "going native" may occur during the data collection process, and reporting multiple perspectives needs to be kept in mind for the final report. Also, the research results may unwittingly present a harmful picture of the participants or the site, and qualitative researchers need to be mindful of protecting the participants' privacy through masking names and developing composite profiles or cases.

In recent APA standards on ethics (2010), discussions report on authorship and the proper disclosure of information. For example, honesty—and how authors should not falsify authorship, the evidence provided in a report, the actual data, the findings, and the conclusions of a study—is stressed. Further, plagiarism should be avoided by knowing about the types of permissions needed to cite the works by others in a study. Reports should also not disclose information that will potentially harm participants in the present or in the future. The form of report writing should communicate in clear, appropriate language for the intended audiences of the report.

Another area of emerging interest in the APA standards on ethics (2010) resides in the publication of a study. It is important to share information from a research study with participants and stakeholders. This may include sharing practical information, posting information on websites, and publishing in languages that can be understood by a wide audience. There is also concern today about multiple publications from the same research sources and the piecemeal division of studies into parts and their separate publication. Also, publishers often ask authors to sign letters of compliance with ethical practices and to state that they do not have a conflict of interest in the results and publications of the studies.

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, 2009, pp. 74–75), I advance a constructionist/interpretivist form. This form (shown in Example 3.1) 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 (Creswell, 2009, pp. 74–75)

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 and philosophical assumptions/interpretive frameworks (optional)

  Qualitative research approach used

  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 transformative perspective (Creswell, 2009, pp. 75–76). This format (as shown in Example 3.2) 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 Transformative Format (Creswell, 2009, pp. 75–76)

Introduction

    Statement of the problem (including literature about the problem)

    The transformative/participatory issue

    Purpose of the study

    The research questions

    Delimitations and limitations

Procedures

    Characteristics of qualitative research and philosophical assumptions (optional)

    Qualitative research approach

    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 transformative changes

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

The third format, Example 3.3, is similar to the transformative format, but it advances the use of a theoretical lens (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). 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/Interpretive Lens Format (Marshall & Rossman, 2010, p. 58)

Introduction

    Overview

    Topic and purpose

    Significance for knowledge, practice, policy, action

    Framework and general research questions

    Limitations

Literature review

    Theoretical traditions and current thoughts for framing the question

    Review and critique of related empirical research

    Essays and opinions of experts

Design and methodology

    Overall approach and rationale

    Site or population selection and sampling strategies

    Access, role, reciprocity, trust, rapport

    Personal biography

    Ethical and political considerations

    Data collection methods

    Data analysis procedures

    Procedures to address trustworthiness and credibility

Appendices (entry letters, data collection and management details, sampling strategies, timelines, budget, notes from pilot studies)

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 (2005)

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

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

3. I propose to study . . . (purpose)

4. The setting and participants are appropriate for this study . . . (data collection)

5. The methods I plan to use will provide the data I need to answer the research questions . . . (data collection)

6. Analysis will generate answers to these questions . . . (analysis)

7. The findings will be validated by . . . (validation)

8. The study poses no serious ethical problems . . . (ethics)

9. Preliminary results support the practicability and value of the study . . . (pilot project)

These four examples speak only to designing a plan or proposal for a qualitative study. In addition 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, an interpretive/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 both inductively and deductively 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 collection and 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, and an interpretive/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. 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.

Ethical issues need to be anticipated and planned for in designing a qualitative study. These issues arise in many phases of the research process. They develop prior to conducting the study when researchers seek approval for the inquiry. They arise at the beginning of the study when the researchers first contact the participants, gain consent to participate in the study, and acknowledge the customs, culture, and charters of the research site. The ethical issues especially arise during data collection with respect for the site and the participants, and gathering data in ways that will not create power imbalances and "use" the participants. They also come during the data analysis phase when researchers do not side

with participants, shape findings in a particular direction, and respect the privacy of individuals as their information is reported. In the reporting phase of research, inquirers need to be honest, not plagiarize the work of others; refrain from presenting information that potentially harms participants; and communicate in a useful, clear way to stakeholders. In publishing research studies, inquirers need to openly share data with others, avoid duplicating their studies, and comply with procedures asked by publishers.

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

ADDITIONAL READINGS

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Morse, J. M., & Richards, L. (2002). *README FIRST for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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EXERCISES

1. It is important to be able to "see" how authors incorporate the characteristics of qualitative research into their published studies. Select one of the qualitative articles presented in Appendices B–F. Discuss each of the major characteristics advanced in this chapter as they have been applied in the journal article. Note which characteristics are "easy" and which are "more difficult" to identify. The characteristics mentioned earlier are the following:

- The researcher conducts the study in the field in a natural setting.
- The researcher does not use someone else's instrument but gathers data on his or her own instrument.
- The researcher collects multiple types of data.
- The researcher uses both inductive and deductive reasoning in making sense of the data.
- The researcher reports the perspectives of the participants and their multiple meanings.
- The researcher reports the setting or context in which the problem is being studied.
- The researcher allows the design or procedures of the study to emerge.
- The researcher discusses his or her background and how it shapes the interpretation of the findings.
- The researcher reports a complex picture of the phenomenon being studied.

2. Consider how to address an ethical issue. From Table 3.2, choose one of the ethical issues that arise during the process of research. Invent a dilemma that might happen in your own research and then present how you might anticipate resolving it in the design of your study.

3. Before designing your own study, it is helpful to think about the way that qualitative studies are structured. One way to begin thinking about the structure of qualitative studies is to sketch out the flow of activities that authors used in their published studies. To this end, I would like you to select one of the articles (a different one than you used to answer Exercise 1) in Appendices B–F. I would like you to draw a picture of the flow of the larger ideas using boxes or circles and arrows to indicate the sequence of the ideas. For example, one study may start with a discussion

about the "problem" and then move on to a "theoretical model" and then on to the "purpose," and so forth. By engaging in this activity, you will have a general structure for how you might organize and present the topics in your own study.

4. Overall, any project undertaken by a qualitative researcher needs to be an insightful study that someone would like to read. Here are some design elements that would make your study attractive to a reader:

- Study an unusual group of people.
- Take an angle or perspective that may not be expected. It might well be the reverse side (the shadow side) of what *is* expected.
- Study an unusual group of people or an unusual location.
- Collect data that are not typically expected in social science research (e.g., collect sounds, have participants take pictures).
- Present findings in an unusual way, such as through the creation of analogies (see Wolcott, 2010) or maps or other types of figures and tables.
- Study a timely topic that many individuals are discussing and that is in the news media.

Consider which (one or more) of these aspects fit your project and discuss how they relate to your study.