

Clarifying Qualitative Research: A Focus on Traditions

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There is considerable confusion in the educational literature about the nature of qualitative research. In this article I argue that a major source of the confusion arises from discussing qualitative research as if it is one approach. The discussion in the educational literature concerning qualitative research can be clarified by recognizing that qualitative research comes in many different varieties, which can be more clearly identified and understood by using the notion of research traditions. To apply this concept to the discussion of qualitative research, I describe briefly and compare six traditions from the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. These traditions are human ethology, ecological psychology, holistic ethnography, cognitive anthropology, ethnography of communication, and symbolic interactionism. I conclude that we may increase our understanding of qualitative research by focusing our discussions at the level of traditions.

- 1 Until recently, educational research has drawn primarily from psychological traditions that operate within a positivistic approach. However, within the past 10 years educational researchers and psychologists such as Campbell (1978) and Cronbach (1975) have challenged scholars to transcend the limits of positivism. To address these challenges many scholars looked to literature in disciplines outside psychology and to literature in psychological traditions that previously have been disfavored by educational researchers.
- 2 Subsequent discussions addressed to the general education audience frequently examined the issues as if there were only one alternative to traditional positivism (e.g., Jacob, 1982; Lutz & Ramsey, 1974; Magoon, 1977; Rist, 1977; J.K. Smith, 1983; L. Smith, 1978; Wilson, 1977). Other authors acknowledged more than one alternative to positivism, but discussed the issues as if there were only a single alternative (e.g., Bogdan & Bikien, 1982; Erickson, 1977; Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1980). Although authors have used many different labels for the alternative to positivism, I will use "qualitative" because it is the most widely used term.
- 3 Several themes have emerged from these discussions. Qualitative research has been characterized as emphasizing the importance of conducting research in a natural setting (Bogdan & Bikien, 1982; Lincoln & Cuba, 1985; Patton, 1980; Wilson, 1977), as assuming the importance of understanding participants'

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perspectives (Bogdan & Biklen; Lincoln & Guba; Magoon, 1977; Patton; Rist, 1977; Wilson), and as assuming that it is important for researchers subjectively and empathetically to know the perspectives of the participants (Lincoln & Guba; Patton; Rist; J.K. Smith, 1983; Wilson). Qualitative research is also seen as free from predetermined theories and questions, with questions and theories emerging after data collection rather than being posed before the study begins (Bogdan & Bikien; Lincoln & Guba; Patton; Rist; Wilson). The central method of qualitative research is said to be participant observation (Bogdan & Bikien; Wilson).

- 4 Although these themes occur across several discussions, they are not uniformly agreed upon as the necessary characteristics of qualitative research. Moreover, when one looks more closely at individual discussions, the apparent unity of the qualitative approach vanishes, and one sees considerable diversity. What has been called “qualitative research” conveys different meanings to different people. Needless to say, this has caused considerable confusion among educational researchers (see J.K. Smith, 1983, p. 6).
- 5 In this article I argue that a major source of the confusion lies in discussing qualitative research as if it were one approach. The discussion in the educational literature concerning qualitative research can be clarified by recognizing that qualitative research in the noneducation disciplines comes in many different varieties. These varieties can be more clearly identified and understood by using the notion of research tradition.
- 6 Kuhn (1970) stated that within the sciences there are various groups of scholars who agree among themselves on the nature of the universe they are examining, on legitimate questions and problems to study, and on legitimate techniques to seek solutions. Such a group is said to have a “tradition.” Kuhn further pointed out that a tradition can occur either as an entire discipline or as a school within a discipline. For the purposes of this article it is most useful to look at sub-disciplinary schools. This is the level at which most scholars in the social sciences operate, and it provides a good vehicle for resolving the confusion within education about qualitative research.
- 7 To apply the concept of traditions to the discussion of qualitative research, I shall describe and compare six representative traditions from the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. These traditions are human ethology, ecological psychology, holistic ethnography, cognitive anthropology, ethnography of communication, and symbolic interactionism. I selected these traditions because they have been cited in the education literature as examples of qualitative research and because they provide an illustration of the range of approaches available from noneducation disciplines.
- 8 My purpose here is not to cover all of the qualitative traditions that could be included. Other qualitative traditions include ethnomethodology, structuralfunctionalism, psychological anthropology, and symbolic anthropology. Nor do I intend to attempt an in-depth study of any particular tradition. Instead, I intend to summarize briefly the main points of each tradition covered and, by contrasting the traditions, to illustrate the diversity of qualitative research.¹ References to further reading are provided in each section. Jacob (1987) presented a fuller discussion of the qualitative traditions examined here.

Traditions of Qualitative Research

- 9 In this section I briefly describe qualitative traditions by their historical roots, important assumptions, major foci, central questions, and common methods.

1. Although the six traditions discussed below are treated separately, they are not totally independent. For example, cognitive anthropology and ethnography of communication developed, in part, in response to what were seen as deficiencies in the holistic ethnography tradition. Symbolic interactionism is closely allied with cognitive anthropology in its emphasis on the cognitive aspects of culture. However, for our purposes here it is most useful to emphasize the differences rather than the similarities among the traditions.

Human Ethology

- 10 Human ethology developed from the study of animal behavior within biology and is guided by the synthetic theory of evolution (Blurton Jones, 1972, p. 6; Charlesworth, 1978, p. 7). Ethologists emphasize the importance of understanding the range of naturally occurring behavior and its relationship to the environment in which an animal adapted. Most human ethologists conduct studies of naturally occurring behavior before conducting controlled experiments. They downplay the idea that humans are different from other animals (Blurton Jones 1972, p. 7). For example, although many ethologists acknowledge that language is an important aspect of human behavior, they generally do not analyze human language, but code it merely as “talk” (e.g., Smith & Connolly, 1972, p. 78). Some recognize that there are subjective components to human behavior (e.g., Charlesworth, p. 9; Hinde, 1983), but most human ethologists are not interested in people’s subjective perceptions of what they are doing (Blurton Jones & Woodson, 1979, p. 99).
- 11 Human ethologists focus on questions about immediate causation of behaviors, development of behaviors, biological functions of behaviors, and evolution of specific behaviors. Their primary units of analysis are individuals at the level of anatomically described motor patterns. Data comprise observations collected through videotapes or by nonparticipant observers. The observations are coded into anatomically defined behavior categories, and the data are analyzed quantitatively.
- 12 Blurton Jones (1972), Blurton Jones and Woodson (1979), Charlesworth (1978), Hinde (1982, 1983), and R. K. Smith (1974) presented some conceptual statements about human ethology. Blurton Jones, Hinde (1983), Hutt and Hutt (1970), and P.K. Smith (1974) provided discussions of its methodology.

Ecological Psychology

- 13 Ecological psychology was developed by Roger Barker, Herbert Wright, and their colleagues at the University of Kansas. They drew heavily on natural history field studies and the work of Kurt Lewin (Barker & Wright, 1955, p. 1). Ecological psychologists are interested in the relationships between human behavior and the environment; they see individuals and the environment as interdependent. They assume that there are subjective aspects to behavior which they examine in terms of the goals of human behavior. They also assume that there is a subjective aspect to the environment which they usually discuss in terms of a person’s emotional reactions to the environment. For example, they might be concerned whether a boy does an activity unwillingly or unhappily (Barker & Wright, p. 202).
- 14 Ecological psychologists ask descriptive questions about either individuals’ behavior and environment or about the features of behavior settings. One focus of their work is individuals’ perceived environment and goal-directed behaviors, which they study using “specimen records.” Under the specimen record methodology, nonparticipant observers write a narrative description of the behavior of one person over a substantial period of time (Schoggen, 1978, p. 43). This “stream of behavior” is then divided into segments based on goal-directed actions. Coders draw upon their ordinary knowledge and perceptions to infer the goals that actors intend to achieve, marking off sections of narrative descriptions into segments leading toward specific goals (Wright, 1967, pp. 25-27). These segments are coded and analyzed quantitatively (Wright).
- 15 The second focus in ecological psychology is the transindividual patterns of behavior associated with particular constellations of places, things, and times, which they study using “behavior setting surveys.” In behavior setting surveys, researchers identify all possible behavior settings and then identify those which meet stringent tests for true behavior settings (Barker, 1968). These are then coded for their features and analyzed quantitatively to provide a comprehensive description of all the behavior settings in a particular community or institution during a stated period of time (Barker; Schoggen, 1978, p. 50).

- 16 Barker and his colleagues (Barker, Wright, Schoggen, & Barker, 1978; Barker & Wright, 1955) and Schoggen (1978) discussed the theory and methodology of both foci of ecological psychology. Wright (1967) presented the specimen record approach and Barker (1968) discussed the behavior setting approach in depth.

Holistic Ethnography

- 17 Holistic ethnography developed primarily from the work of Franz Boas in America and Bronislaw Malinowski in England. Culture, a central concept for holistic ethnographers, includes patterns of behavior and patterns for behavior. The concept of patterns of behavior is self-explanatory. Patterns for behavior are seen as systems of “standards for deciding what is, standards for deciding what can be, standards for deciding how one feels about it, standards for deciding what to do about it, and standards for deciding how to go about doing it” (Goodenough, 1971, pp. 21, 22). These standards are seen as shared group phenomena (Goodenough, pp. 36-42), leading to a certain predictability in social life, but without determining behavior (Barrett, 1984, p. 72).
- 18 Holistic ethnographers assume that certain aspects of human culture are central to understanding human life in all societies. These aspects include social organization, economics, family structure, religion, politics, rituals, enculturation patterns, and ceremonial behavior (Pelto, 1970, p. 18). Holistic ethnographers also assume that the various aspects of a culture form a unique, unified whole, with the parts being interdependent (Mead, 1970/ 1973, p. 246).
- 19 Holistic ethnographers focus on the study of the culture of bounded groups, with an interest in describing and analyzing the culture as a whole. Their goal is to describe a unique way of life, documenting the meanings attached to events and showing how the parts fit together into an integrated whole. They approach a particular culture with a minimum of preconceived ideas or theories beyond the general assumptions.
- 20 Although there is considerable diversity in how holistic ethnographers conduct their studies, most hold several basic tenets. First, holistic ethnographers gather empirical evidence directly themselves through “fieldwork,” usually involving participant observation and informal interviews, in the culture they are studying (Malinowski, 1922/1961, pp. 7-8). Second, holistic ethnographers endeavor to document the participants’ points of view, preferably through verbatim statements (Malinowski, p. 23). Third, holistic ethnographers collect a wide range of data using a wide range of methods (Malinowski). Analysis of the data is primarily qualitative.
- 21 Discussions of holistic ethnography are embedded in many discussions of anthropology as a whole. LeVine (1970/1973) and Sanday (1979) explicitly discussed the tradition. Edgerton and Langness (1974), Jongmans and Gutkind (1967), and Pelto (1970) treated holistic ethnographic methods in the context of other anthropological methods. Gutkind, Jongmans, Jonker, Kobben, Sankoff, and Serpenti (1967) presented an annotated bibliography of a wide range of anthropological field methods.

Cognitive Anthropology

- 22 Cognitive anthropology, which has been called ethnoscience or the “new ethnography,” developed from pioneer work by Ward Goodenough and Charles Frake, who drew heavily on the methods of linguistics. Cognitive anthropologists have a mentalistic view of culture. They assume that each bounded group of individuals has a unique system for perceiving and organizing the world and that this culture is organized into categories which are systematically related to one another (Spradley, 1979, p. 93), with classes of phenomena being organized into larger groupings (Tyler, 1969, p. 7). Cognitive anthropologists also assume that a group’s cultural knowledge is reflected in its language — specifically, in semantics (Tyler, p. 6).¹

- 23 Cognitive anthropologists strive to identify phenomena that participants recognize and to understand how groups organize their cultural knowledge, primarily as it is expressed in a group's semantic system. Data, consisting of words and their meanings, are collected primarily through interviews and formal elicitation procedures. Informal interviews and observations provide preliminary data (Spradley, 1979). Data analysis is qualitative and involves the identification of "domains" of cultural knowledge, identification of how terms in each domain are organized, study of the attributes of terms in each domain, and discovery of relationships among cultural domains (Spradley, 1979, 1980).
- 24 Tyler (1969) presented a now classic introduction to cognitive anthropology. Spradley (1972, 1979) discussed the tradition and its associated methods, focusing on semantic data. In another volume (1980) Spradley applied the methods to observational data. Agar (1980, chap. 7) incorporated some techniques of cognitive anthropology into a broader discussion of anthropological methods.

Ethnography of Communication

- 25 Ethnography of communication, which has been called ethnography of speaking, microethnography, or constitutive ethnography, developed from work in anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and nonverbal communication (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982, p. 136; Erickson & Wilson, 1982, p. 42). Ethnographers of communication see culture as central to understanding human behavior. They assume that both verbal and nonverbal communication are culturally patterned even though the persons communicating may not be aware of this patterning (Erickson & Mohatt, p. 136; Philips, 1983, p. 4). They see context, which they define to include the participants in an interaction, as influencing the patterns of communication (Mehan, 1984, p. 175), and they assume that the social structure and "outcomes" of institutional processes are produced at least in part by the processes of face-to-face interaction (Erickson & Mohatt, p. 137; Mehan, 1984, p. 18).
- 26 Ethnographers of communication focus on the patterns of social interaction among members of a cultural group and among members of different cultural groups. They are interested in specifying the patterns and processes of face-to-face interaction and in understanding how these "micro" processes are related to larger "macro" issues of culture and social organization (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982, pp. 137-138; Erickson & Wilson, 1982, p. 43). Ethnographers of communication base their studies on participant observation data and on audio or video recordings of naturally occurring interactions (Erickson & Wilson, p. 43). The machine-recorded data are maximally continuous and comprehensive (Erickson & Wilson, p. 77). Researchers index the machine-recorded data for major social occasions, select segments for detailed analysis, repeatedly view the segments to develop and refine analytic categories, and code the data (Erickson & Mohatt; Mehan, 1979). Analysis of patterns may be either quantitative or qualitative.
- 27 Hymes (1972, 1974) and Gumperz (1968) presented conceptual discussions of ethnography of communication. Erickson (1977) also discussed the tradition. Erickson and Wilson (1982) reviewed methodological issues for the ethnography of communication tradition. Erickson (1986) discussed methods salient to his work, while Erickson and Shultz (1981) discussed their general approach to data analysis.

Symbolic Interactionism

- 28 Symbolic interactionism was developed by Herbert Blumer, drawing on the earlier work of C. H. Mead, Charles Cooley, John Dewey, and W. I. Thomas (Manis & Meltzer, 1978, p. xi). Symbolic interactionists see humans as qualitatively different from other animals. Whereas nonhuman animals act in response to

1. Some recent work goes beyond the study of semantics to "multilexeme constructions interlinking items from disparate semantic domains" (Clement, 1976, p. 55). For some of this more recent work see Agar (1982), Clement, Dougherty (1985), and Holland (1985).

other objects and events based on factors such as instinct or previous conditioning, humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings those objects have for them (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). Symbolic interactionists assume that meanings arise through social interaction (Blumer, p. 4), but that an individual's use of meanings is not automatic. "The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed and the direction of his action" (Blumer, p. 5).

- 29 These assumptions affect how symbolic interactionists view the macro structures of society. They do not see macro structures as having a life of their own. "Human society is to be seen as consisting of acting people, and the life of the society is to be seen as consisting of their actions" (Blumer, 1969, p. 85).
- 30 Symbolic interactionists are interested in understanding the processes involved in symbolic interaction — i.e., they seek to know how individuals take one another's perspective and learn meanings and symbols in concrete instances of interaction (Denzin, 1978, p. 7; Ritzer, 1983, p. 308). To collect appropriate data, symbolic interactionists primarily use participant observation and open interviews. They also collect life histories, autobiographies, case studies, and letters (Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975, p. 58). Analysis of these data is usually qualitative.
- 31 Blumer (1969), Manis and Meltzer (1978), and Rose (1962) discussed the basic assumptions and principles of symbolic interactionism. Becker (1970) and Blumer (1969) presented position papers on methodology in symbolic interactionism. Bogdan and Taylor (1975) and Schatzman and Strauss (1973) presented more concrete, "how-to" discussions.

Comparison of Traditions on Themes

- 32 As mentioned in the introduction, the educational literature on qualitative research contains several themes. In this section I compare the above six traditions on these themes and find considerable variability among the traditions.

Natural Setting

- 33 All the traditions examined here assume that the setting has an important influence on human behavior. All except cognitive anthropology collect most or all of their data in "natural" settings. Cognitive anthropologists use controlled elicitation techniques for much of their data; however, the question formats used in these techniques are derived from naturally occurring statements in the language.

Subjective Aspects of Human Behavior

- 34 Scholars in all of the traditions examined acknowledge that there is a subjective dimension to human behavior. However, they differ substantially in how they define the subjective dimension and the role they give it in their work. This dimension illustrates the diversity among the traditions.
- 35 Some human ethologists acknowledge that there are subjective components of human behavior (Charlesworth, 1978; Hinde, 1983). However, they generally are disinterested in this subjective aspect (Blurton Jones & Woodson, 1979, p. 99), and have paid little attention to it. Similarly, in their studies of behavior settings, ecological psychologists focus only on observable patterns of behavior.
- 36 In contrast, ecological psychologists make subjective aspects of human behavior a primary focus in their specimen record studies. First, they assume that individuals' behavior is directed by their goals (Barker & Wright, 1955, p. 179). Second, ecological psychologists also assume that individuals have subjective perceptions of their environment, which Barker and Wright define primarily in terms of the individual's emotional reactions to the environment.
- 37 Holistic ethnographers, cognitive anthropologists, and ethnographers of communication do not focus on the goals and emotions of individuals, but instead attempt to understand human society through the concept of culture, which is seen as involving a subjective component of shared patterns for behavior. While all

three traditions share some basic assumptions about culture, they differ in further assumptions they make and how they use the concept of culture in their work. Some holistic ethnographers emphasize culture as a subjective phenomenon in their work, while others combine it with the study of observable behavior. Cognitive anthropologists assume that culture is reflected primarily in language, and specifically in semantics (Tyler, 1969, p. 6). They study a culture's categories and the organizing principles underlying them through the study of semantic systems in the language. Ethnographers of communication assume that verbal and nonverbal social interaction are culturally patterned (Erickson & Mohatt, 1982, p. 136; Philips, 1983, p. 4). They study cultural patterns of social interaction, and how these patterns are related to larger social "facts" (Erickson & Mohatt, pp. 137-138; Erickson & Wilson, 1982, p. 43).

- 38 Symbolic interactionists study the subjective aspects of human life by focusing on human life as a moving process in which participants are defining and interpreting each other's acts. They are concerned with understanding how these processes occur, how individuals are able to take one another's perspective and learn meanings in concrete instances of interaction (Denzin, 1978, p. 7; Ritzer, 1983, p. 308).
- 39 In sum, the six traditions examined take different approaches to the subjective. Ecological psychologists in their studies of behavior settings and human ethologists pay little attention to it. The five traditions that acknowledge the importance of the subjective in human life do this in diverse ways. In their specimen record studies ecological psychologists define the subjective in terms of individuals' goals and emotional reactions to their environments, while the three anthropological traditions define the subjective as culture. Symbolic interactionists define the subjective in terms of symbolic interaction processes and what individuals do with socially derived meanings.

Subjective Knowledge of Subjective Data

- 40 All of the traditions examined are interested in using objective means to study observable behavior. For example, human ethologists try to develop categories of behavior in terms of body parts and motor patterns without inferential or motivational labels (Blurton Jones, 1972, p. 12; Hutt & Hutt, 1970, p. 30; McGrew, 1972, p. 19). Ecological psychologists have produced extensive objective descriptions of the purposeful, goal-directed behavior of individuals: "the description includes the manner in which the actions are carried out; the 'how' of everything done and said is of great importance" (Schoggen, 1978, p. 43). Many holistic ethnographers are interested in objectively documenting patterns of behavior in a culture, and ethnographers of communication, in their use of audio taped and videotaped data, are also concerned with collecting objective, retrievable records of social interaction (Mehan, 1979, pp. 18-20). All of the traditions except human ethology are interested in subjective aspects of human behavior as well as observable behavior. The traditions have varying ideas about how best to know and study these subjective aspects. Ecological psychologists use detailed objective descriptions in specimen record studies as the base to infer the subjects' subjective states. "The inferences included are at a low level, the level of inference about feelings and motivations of others that is regularly employed by persons of normal social sensitivity in ordinary social intercourse in a culture with which they are familiar" (Schoggen, 1978, p. 43). Holistic ethnographers, cognitive anthropologists, and ethnographers of communication want to report participants' culture objectively. One methodological tenet in holistic ethnography is that it is important to have verbatim statements of the participants in order to get their views of their world (Malinowski, 1922/1961, pp. 23, 25). Cognitive anthropologists place particular emphasis on removing the potential bias of the researcher's own cultural categories and use controlled elicitation techniques to minimize this influence. Ethnographers of communication often review taped data with participants to get their reports of the cultural meanings of the interactions recorded.
- 41 Some researchers in the holistic ethnographic tradition also discuss the role of the researcher's subjective experiences through participant observation as being an important way to know about the culture. The

ethnographers are seen as data collection instruments themselves and their subjective "knowing" of the culture provides important information (Malinowski, 1922/1961).

- 42 Symbolic interactionists have made the strongest statements about subjective ways of knowing subjective aspects of human life. Blumer has stated that to truly document the processes of symbolic interaction researchers need to get "inside the experience of the actor" (Blumer, as quoted by Meltzer et al., 1975, pp. 57-58). This approach has been called "sympathetic introspection" (Meltzer et al., p. 51) and *verstehen* (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, pp. 13-14).
- 43 To summarize, the traditions examined take different stances toward the kind of data needed to study the subjective aspects of human life. The continuum runs from traditions that want only objective evidence to those that regard subjective evidence as essential.

Theory and the Generation of Research Questions

- 44 All the traditions examined stress that descriptive studies should precede studies that test specific theories (Barker & Wright, 1955, pp. 13-14; Blumer, 1969, pp. 47-49; Blurton Jones, 1972, pp. 4, 14; Hymes, 1980; Tyler, 1969). The purpose of this descriptive phase is to discover what is happening in the natural setting, and in some cases to understand participants' meanings. All the traditions allow for the possibility of conducting studies focused on testing specific hypotheses after the necessary descriptive groundwork has been laid.
- 45 Although researchers in all of the traditions examined emphasize the importance of description and eschew preconceived ideas, they all hold some assumptions which guide the development of their descriptive questions. In each tradition these assumptions are related to what scholars in the tradition think should be the focus of study.
- 46 The traditions differ in the amount of discovery that is incorporated within the design of a single study. Human ethologists and ecological psychologists have predetermined questions and designs for individual studies which do not change during the course of the study. In contrast, holistic ethnographers, cognitive anthropologists, ethnographers of communication, and symbolic interactionists frequently develop specific questions and research goals after beginning a study (Blumer, 1969, p. 48; LeVine, 1970/1973, p. 183; Spradley, 1979). The research design is seen as "an exploration into the unknown," in which the researcher needs to get background information on the specific group(s) being studied before formulating more specific questions (LeVine, p. 183).
- 47 In sum, the role of theory and the generation of research questions in the traditions examined here is complex. All of the traditions believe that descriptive studies should precede studies that test specific hypotheses. However, the traditions differ in the amount of discovery they incorporate within a single study. Two traditions have predetermined questions and designs for individual studies; four traditions, on the other hand, frequently allow specific research questions and related research designs to "emerge" during the course of a study.

Participant Observation

- 48 Participant observation plays various roles in the traditions examined. It is not used by human ethologists. Nor is it used by ecological psychologists for collecting specimen records or for describing behavior settings. However, it is sometimes used by ecological psychologists to identify behavior settings (Barker & Schoggen, 1973, pp. 49-50; Schoggen, 1978, p. 50).
- 49 Participant observation frequently is used by ethnographers of communication and cognitive anthropologists for preliminary data collection (Erickson & Wilson, 1982; Spradley, 1979). However, ethnographers of communication primarily use films or tapes to record sequences of social interaction (Erickson & Wil-

son, 1982, p. 43; Mehan, 1979, pp. 18-20), while cognitive anthropologists rely on open-ended interviews and controlled eliciting for their primary methods of data collection (Spradley, 1979).

- 50 Participant observation is a more central method for many holistic ethnographers and symbolic interactionists (Malinowski 1922/1961; Meltzer et al., 1975). However, most holistic ethnographers see participant observation as one component of the larger “fieldwork” (Clammer, 1984) and some holistic ethnographers emphasize openended interviews instead of observations (Agar, 1982). Symbolic interactionists see participant observation as the most important method of data collection but do use others, such as open interviews, life histories, autobiographies, and letters (Meltzer et al., p. 58).
- 51 In sum, none of the traditions examined use participant observation as the only method of data collection. One tradition does not use participant observation at all. One uses it for preliminary data collection to help identify units of analysis. Two traditions use it for preliminary data collection. And two traditions use it as a central method, along with other methods.

Discussion

- 52 Examination of the six traditions discussed above has shown that they present diverse approaches to qualitative research. The themes by which the educational literature has characterized qualitative research appear in varying ways among the different traditions.
- 53 Continuing to discuss qualitative research as if it were one approach can only increase the confusion in the education literature. The one-approach treatment has led to confusion and disagreement as authors have focused on identifying one set of “correct” features of qualitative research. The concept of traditions can help clear up this confusion by suggesting that different authors, drawing from different traditions or trying to present a transtradition approach, have focused on different features.
- 54 Viewing qualitative research as one approach may also lead to confusion when educational researchers study the noneducation literature in which qualitative traditions have developed. This literature confronts education scholars with diversity, not unity. Awareness of the various traditions will help educational researchers understand that the diversity is not a sign of misunderstanding or disagreement, but rather a reflection of various approaches.
- 55 Examining the differences among the traditions contributes to clarifying the discussion of qualitative research in education in another way. Not all the traditions cited in the education literature as examples of qualitative research seem to be appropriately treated as such. Specifically, human ethology, except for its emphasis on naturalistic description, follows a positivistic approach.
- 56 Awareness of traditions, I believe, is important not only to clarify qualitative research in education, but also to foster it. The one-approach view of qualitative research may inhibit this research by implying that researchers should incorporate all the features of qualitative research in any one research project. This may lead educational researchers who are uncomfortable with some of the features to reject qualitative research completely. In contrast, focus on the various traditions has shown that different themes represent different options for qualitative research, not invariable requirements. Moreover, these themes are implemented in varying ways by different traditions. Thus, researchers are presented with a range of research options, not just an all-or-nothing choice between qualitative research and positivistic research.
- 57 Educational discussions of qualitative research which treat it as one approach have focused on methods or assumptions, usually ignoring the issues of appropriate foci of study and levels of analysis. Both of these vary widely in the traditions examined above. Awareness of the different traditions can give educational researchers new viewpoints, open up new problems for study, and, in general, expand the range of ways available to address educational problems.

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