Qualitative Inquiry Traditions

Descriptive Designs: Qualitative

In previous units we have discussed experimental and other research designs — quasi-experimental, correlational, and descriptive. We have been careful to observe that correlational designs permit the researcher to state that a relationship exist between or among variables, and that only the experimental design permits researchers to make statements of causal relationships. In this unit we look at one particular type of descriptive design, known as qualitative. All qualitative approaches are descriptive and, as is the case for all descriptive designs, do not enable the investigator to make causal statements.

Differing paradigms

Shulman (1997) states that education itself is not a discipline but rather is a subject area of interest for several different academic disciplines. Each of the academic disciplines that investigates educational topics uses the research methods developed within its own discipline and brings to the investigation differing orientations, assumptions, goals, and methods. Psychology was, arguably, the first of the social sciences to investigate the problems of education. Correlational methods were used to develop theories of intellectual ability and to investigate other individual differences that could not be manipulated directly. At the same time, experimental methods were used to study both learning and verbal behavior. To a lesser extent, sociologists also used correlational and quasi-experimental methods to study educational problems. The traditional methods of investigation used by psychologists and sociologists are referred to collectively as “quantitative methods.” Gage (1989, p. 8) states, “It was psychology, in large part, that bred the objective-quantitative approach to research.... It was anthropology, in large part, that spawned the interpretive-qualitative approach. It was mainly the work of analysts from economics, political science, and sociology that produced critical theory.” Critical theory is “A term applied to several approaches to research and scholarship, most of which blend relativism with left-wing political commitment” (Vogt, 1999, p. 63).

As you might imagine, when researchers from different disciplines with differing views of ontology, epistemology, axiology¹, rhetoric, and methods “compete” in the same area of investigation, tensions surface. At one time these exchanges were a bit more spirited that we usually expect from academicians. Gage (1989, p. 10) reports

One set of battles took place at an “International Conference on Alternative Paradigms for Inquiry,” sponsored by Indiana University and Phi Delta Kappa, directed by Egon Guba, and held on March 25-26, 1989, before the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco. The conference

¹. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that focuses on the question, What is the nature of reality? Epistemology, the study of knowledge, asks questions such as What is the nature and criteria for knowledge? How do we know whatever it is we purport to know? Axiology is the study of values.
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announcement described the debate on paradigms as “characterized by jockeying for position and carving out of territory, sometimes resulting in *ad hominem* attacks and charges of lack of integrity . . . sometimes acrimonious but always lively.” In 2 days of lectures and discussions, more than 200 partisans struggled with paradigmatic issues. The conference ended with the expectation of more such strenuous engagements.

This level of intensity is unusual at professional conferences. We will not attempt to trace the arguments debated at that conference, but merely note that researchers who specialize in the use of qualitative approaches say that their assumptions and methods differ radically from the quantitative approaches as explained in our course readings by Bolles (1968) and D’Amato (1970). The difference is so great that they say it cannot be considered as anything less than a paradigm shift. “Paradigm” was originally used by grammarians to refer to a pattern in a conjugation or declension (e.g., ring, rang, rung). Thomas Kuhn (1962) used the term to refer to an academic discipline’s general way of seeing its subject matter. For example, during the lifetime of Albert Einstein physics is said to have undergone a paradigm shift. Psychology, during the lifetime of John Watson shifted from structuralism to behaviorism. More recently, psychology shifted again, this time from behaviorism to cognitive approaches.

**Qualitative Traditions**

The history of qualitative approaches will not be traced here (see Creswell, 1998; Mills, 1981). Jacobs (1988) states that qualitative research consists of six distinct traditions:

1. **Human ethology —** Observation and detailed descriptions of behavior in natural settings are the characteristic research methods of ethologists. The term originated in the study of animal behavior. Instead of observing laboratory rats running mazes as a method of testing hypotheses about learning, the ethologist travels to the natural habitat, say to South America to study monkeys in their jungle habitat. Ethology requires an extended stay in the field, with a premium placed on being as non-intrusive as possible, and recording observations in notebooks, and on audio and video tape. More recently, the term is used to refer to research about human behavior in its natural setting. The primary data collection method is observation, and reports emphasize straightforward description with minimal interpretation.

2. **Ecological psychology —** The focus of ecological psychology is on the relationship between humans and their social environment. Data collection entails the extended observation of subjects in their natural settings. The observer wears a device, known as a stenograph, that covers his mouth and looks like an funnel. Inside the funnel is a microphone and a wire runs from the stenograph to a belt-mounted tape recorder. As the researcher observes the interaction of the subject and his surround, the researcher is speaking his observations into the microphone. The stenograph muffles the sound of his voice sufficiently so that humans a few feet away cannot hear. Equipped with this device, a research may, for example, arrive at a school administrator’s house at 6 a.m., and shadow the administrator throughout the day and evening, continuously recording his observations. The specimen record from the day is then transcribed and, using the transcription, the behavioral stream is categorized based on the goal of each segment of behav-

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1. Your humble instructor recalls taking an upper level undergraduate course, “Ethology of Behavior” offered the Psychology department. Each class member selected an animal to observe. My first choice was lions in the Serengeti, but lacking funds, I settled on days and days of observing primates at the Potosi Zoo. The methods of observation and recording differed little from my youth when I observed wildlife on daily hikes down to the river and through the back woods after completing chores on the farm.
ior. As you might imagine, listening to 12-16 hours of tape and transcribing is very labor intensive. One of the nation’s foremost ecological psychologists, Dr. Scott, teaches ecological psychology courses at Indiana University.

3. Holistic ethnography — Holism is the assumption that groups, collectives, or wholes are more than, or different from, the sum of their individual parts. This assumption generates research that stresses studying wholes or complete systems, rather than analyzing individual parts. The systems may be corporations, unions, political parties, churches, schools, or any organization. The holists would say, for example, that Intel exists independently of any individuals who work for it or own its stock. Workers come and go and investors buy and sell. Regardless of these individual changes, the corporation still exists, as long as those who depart or sell are replace by others. Thus, say holists, it makes sense to speak of Intel (or whatever the particular organization), as “wanting,” “deciding,” “planning” as an entity independent of its individual parts. The study performed by holistic ethnographers focuses on the culture of particular groups and their research methods are those used by anthropologists.

4. Cognitive anthropology — This branch of anthropology assumes that cultural knowledge is embedded in a particular group’s language, particularly in the semantics. The primary research methods are informal interviews and observation. Data consists of words and their meanings. From this data cognitive anthropologists attempt to discern the phenomena that seem to give meaning to a particular culture.

5. Ethnography of communication — All introductory education research method textbooks, such as the one used in this course, devote one or more methods to qualitative methods. Although several of the qualitative methods mentioned here are never discussed, virtually all books include a discussion of ethnography. Ethnographers view understanding culture as essential to understanding human behavior. The primary data collection method is participant observation. While a participant in a social system, the ethnographer relies on direct, systematic observation to collect data. These observations are recorded in journals, on audio tape, or film. Existing documents may also become data, as well as art works. From repeated examination of these data, the investigator develops and refines analytic categories and uses these to code the data.

6. Symbolic interaction — The central assumption of this approach is that meaning emerges from social interaction. However, not all individuals who are participants in a given social interaction attribute the same meaning to the interaction. One goal of these researchers is to study how individuals become aware of other individuals’ perspectives of a social interaction. Participant observation and interviews are used to collect data, which is later studied and analytic categories emerge.

Although Jacob (1987, 1988) provides a good introduction to qualitative traditions, other authors slice the qualitative pie in somewhat different ways. One popular text (Creswell, 1998) lists five qualitative traditions:

1. Biographical studies, including autobiography, life history, and oral history, classical biography, and interpretative biography.

2. Phenomenological studies — a description of the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a particular phenomenon. The investigator is said to set aside all prejudices and to rely on “intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).

3. Grounded theory — “The centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory closely related to the context of the phenomenon being studied” (Creswell, 1998, p. 56).

4. Ethnography — A branch of anthropology and that involves the description and interpretation of a culture or a particular social group or system. Ethnography includes several subdivisions, each with a somewhat different theoretical orientation, including postmodernism, critical theory, feminism, Marxism, multiculturalism, and others.
References

5. Case study — A case study involves the gathering and analyzing data about a particular example as an approach to studying a broader class. The assumption is that the case is in important ways typical of the broader class. The case can be an individual (e.g., an elementary school principal), an event, a society, or virtually any other instance of a broad class — such a school. The case study method permits intensive analysis of specifics, but the disadvantage is the difficulty in building an argument that from one particular case one can generalize to other cases. For example, one might conduct a case study of the 2000 presidential election and report all of the interesting details that occurred, particularly after November 7. Could one reasonably generalize from this one case to other presidential elections?

References


