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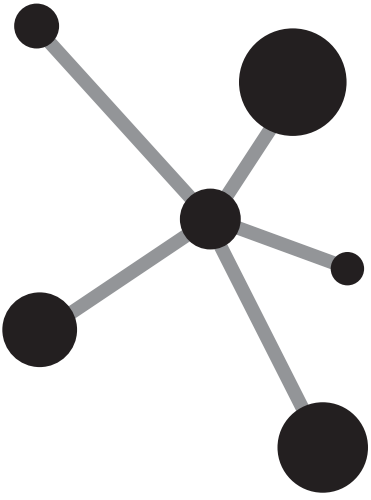
FUNDAMENTALS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



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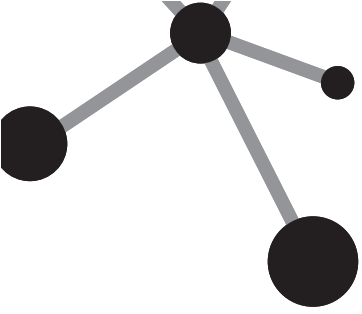

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GENRES, ELEMENTS, AND STYLES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

THIS BOOK does not presume to serve as a comprehensive review of qualitative research but provides a practical introduction to its fundamentals, from this particular author's perspective. Qualitative research consists of an eclectic collection of approaches and methods used in several social science disciplines. *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research* first provides an overview of the field, then proceeds to its most commonly applied data collection methods. Research design and data analysis matters are discussed next, followed by recommendations for the writing and dissemination of reports, and resources for learning more about the subject.

Qualitative Research: A Definition

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for a wide variety of approaches to and methods for the study of natural social life. The information or data collected and analyzed is primarily (but not exclusively) nonquantitative in character, consisting of textual materials such as interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and documents, and/or visual materials such as artifacts, photographs, video recordings,

and Internet sites, that document human experiences about others and/or one's self in social action and reflexive states.

The goals of qualitative research are also multiple, depending on the purpose of the particular project. Outcomes are most often composed of essential representations and presentations of salient findings from the analytic synthesis of data and can include: documentation of cultural observations, new insights and understandings about individual and social complexity, evaluation of the effectiveness of programs or policies, artistic renderings of human meanings, and/or the critique of existing social orders and the initiation of social justice. Qualitative research is conducted within and across multiple disciplines such as education, sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication, journalism, health care, social work, justice studies, business, and other related fields.

Just as there are multiple literary genres (short story, poetry, novel, drama, etc.), literary elements (symbolism, metaphor, alliteration, etc.), and literary styles (realism, comedy, tragedy, etc.), so too are there multiple genres, elements, and styles of qualitative research. Naturalistic inquiry remains solidly grounded in the nonfictional realm of social reality for its investigation, yet its write-ups can employ expressive and creative literary components.

Genres of Qualitative Research

A literary *genre* is a type or kind of literature characterized by a particular purpose, structure, content, length, or format. Different genres include poetry, short story, drama, novel, romance, and science fiction, for example. In qualitative research, there is also a variety of genre: the usual criteria are the particular approach to inquiry, and the representation and presentation of the study. The overview below is not an exhaustive list, but is a compilation of the most common genres in which researchers across multiple disciplines work. Also, some of these genres are not discrete; a few can be combined into one study. For example, an ethnography can also be a case study, an autoethnography can be presented in an arts-based research format, and so on.

Ethnography. Ethnography is the observation and documentation of social life in order to render an account of a group's culture.

Ethnography refers to both the process of long-term fieldwork and the final (most often) written product. Originally the method of anthropologists studying foreign peoples, ethnography is now multidisciplinary in its applications to explore cultures in classrooms, urban street settings, businesses and organizations, and even cyberspace.

Culture is a somewhat contested term and a difficult one to clarify—literally hundreds of definitions for the concept exist. Just a sampling of attempts includes the following:

> We define culture as: *knowledge* that is learned and shared and that people use to generate behavior and interpret experience. . . . [Culture is] social knowledge, not knowledge unique to an individual. (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005, pp. 5, 6)

But Chang (2008) offers an alternative to the notion of culture as a fixed and group construct:

> [P]eople are neither blind followers of a predefined set of social norms, cultural clones of their previous generations, nor copycats of their cultural contemporaries. Rather, . . . individuals have autonomy to interpret and alter cultural knowledge and skills acquired from others and to develop their own versions of culture while staying in touch with social expectations. (p. 16)

Thus, culture is not a "thing" but an individual and social evolutionary process. "Through the individual we come to understand the culture, and through the culture we come to understand the individual" (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007, p. 286). But how does *culture* differ from and relate to the concept of *society*? Kendell (2004) explains:

> *Culture* is the knowledge, language, values, customs, and material objects that are passed from person to person and from one generation to the next in a human group or society.
>
> . . . [A] *society* is a large social grouping that occupies the same geographic territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations.

> Whereas a society is composed of people, a culture is composed of ideas, behavior, and material possessions. Society and culture are interdependent; neither could exist without the other. (p. 42)

Of the many definitions and explanations of culture and society I've read, I've found that educational anthropologist Frederick Erickson's (1997) resonates the most with others since he cleverly uses a contemporary analogy to explain the term. Culture is like a "toolkit" that permits us to get things done. And,

> [by] analogy to computers, which are information tools, culture can be considered as the software—the coding systems for doing meaning and executing sequences of work—by which our human physiological and cognitive hardware is able to operate so that we can make sense and take action with others in daily life. Culture structures the "default" conditions of the everyday practices of being human. (p. 33)

The goal of ethnography, then, is to research the default conditions (and their "software updates") of a people's ways of living. For example, Rebekah Nathan's (2005) ethnography, *My Freshman Year*, reports a professor's observations of undergraduate life when she covertly enrolled as a full-time student and lived on campus. Her detailed fieldwork on student culture documents how a university's mission and goals do not necessarily harmonize with student cultural concerns such as dorm life, dining patterns, preferred friendships, and attitudes toward classes and scheduling.

Grounded Theory. Grounded theory (discussed further in Chapter 4) is a methodology for meticulously analyzing qualitative data in order to understand human processes and to construct theory—that is, theory grounded in the data or constructed "from the ground up." The originators of the methodology were Anselm L. Strauss and Barney G. Glaser, sociologists who in the 1960s studied illness and dying. Their original work has been reenvisioned by such later writers as Juliet Corbin, Adele E. Clarke, and Kathy Charmaz.

Grounded theory is an analytic process of constantly comparing small data units, primarily but not exclusively collected

from interviews, through a series of cumulative coding cycles to achieve abstraction and a range of dimensions to the emergent categories' properties. Classic grounded theory works toward achieving a core or central category that conceptually represents what the study is all about. This core or central category becomes the foundation for generating a theory about the processes observed.

For example, Charmaz (2009) studied how serious chronic illness affects the body and the identity of self. A core category or "mode of living" with physical impairment that she identified from her interviews was *adapting*. Note how the word is a gerund (an "-ing" word) and implies *process*—actions that people take to solve a problem. Charmaz explains the theory, one that was not preapplied to the data, but one that emerged from them through her analysis of interview transcripts, appropriately coded to construct the actions at work in her participants:

> By adapting, I mean altering life and self to accommodate to physical losses and to reunify the body and self accordingly. Adapting implies that the individual acknowledges impairment and alters life and self in socially and personally acceptable ways. Bodily limits and social circumstances often force adapting to loss. Adapting shades into acceptance. Thus, ill people adapt when they try to accommodate and flow with the experience of illness. (p. 155)

Later in the narrative, Charmaz extends the analysis by outlining and discussing the stages people undergo as they adapt. Again, note the gerunds at work here: "After long years of ignoring, minimizing, struggling against, and reconciling themselves to illness, they adapt as they regain a sense of wholeness, of unity of body and self in the face of loss" (p. 156).

Grounded theory is a complex, multistage genre of qualitative research, but an approach that has been utilized in thousands of studies in many disciplines since it was first introduced.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of the nature and meaning of things—a phenomenon's essence and essentials that determine what it is. The genre's roots lie in philosophy's