

Second Edition

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY & RESEARCH DESIGN

Choosing Among Five Approaches

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SAGE Publications

Thousand Oaks ■ London ■ New Delhi

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Introduction

Work on the first edition of this book initially began during a 1994 summer qualitative seminar in Vail, Colorado, sponsored by the University of Denver under the able guidance of Edith King of the College of Education. One morning, I facilitated the discussion about qualitative data analysis. I began on a personal note, introducing one of my recent qualitative studies—a case study of a campus response to a student gun incident (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995). I knew this case might provoke some discussion and present some complex analysis issues. It involved a Midwestern university's reaction to a gunman who attempted to fire on students in his undergraduate class. Standing before the group, I chronicled the events of the case, the themes, and the lessons we learned about a university reaction to a near tragic event. Then, unplanned, Harry Wolcott of the University of Oregon, another resource person for our seminar, raised his hand and asked for the podium. He explained how *he* would approach the study as a cultural anthropologist. To my surprise, he “turned” our case study into ethnography, framing the study in an entirely new way. After Harry had concluded, Les Goodchild, then of Denver University, spoke, and he turned the gunman case into a historical study. I delighted in these surprise turns of my initial case study. This unforeseen set of events kindled an idea I had long harbored—that one designed a study differently depending on the type of qualitative research. I began to write the first edition of this book, guided by a single, compelling question: How does the type or approach of qualitative inquiry shape the design or procedures of a study?

Purpose

Both editions of this book are my attempt to answer this question. My primary intent is to examine five different approaches to qualitative inquiry—narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies—and to discuss their procedures for conducting a qualitative study. The conduct of a study includes the introduction to a study, including the formation of the purpose and research questions; data collection; data analysis; report writing; and standards of validation and evaluation. In the process of providing procedures for conducting a study, I introduce a comparative analysis of the five approaches so that researchers can make an informed choice as to which approach best suits their research problems.

Because the procedures for conducting research evolve from a researcher's philosophical and theoretical stances, I begin with these stances. Then, to set the stage for discussing each of the five approaches, I summarize the major characteristics and provide an example of each from a published journal article. With this understanding, I next go through the steps in the process of conducting a study and illustrate how this might proceed for each of the five types of qualitative research. Throughout the book, I provide tables that summarize major differences among the approaches. I end the book by taking the qualitative case study presented at the beginning of the book in Chapter 5 and "turn" the type of study from the original case study to a narrative study, a phenomenology, a grounded theory study, and an ethnography. By reading this book, I hope that you will gain a better understanding of the steps in the process of research, five qualitative approaches to inquiry, and the differences and similarities among the five *approaches to inquiry* (see the glossary in Appendix A for definitions of terms in bold italics).

What Is New in This Edition

Since I wrote the first edition of this book, many changes have occurred on the landscape of qualitative research, and these changes and my thinking about them are reflected in this second edition. Qualitative research has become more accepted as a legitimate mode of inquiry in the social behavioral and health sciences than it was 10 years ago. Courses on qualitative research, funding invitations for qualitative projects, and the emergence of qualitative journals all speak to an increased acceptance of qualitative research within the social and human sciences. Thus, I provide references to new books that have captured the attention of the qualitative community since I wrote the first edition during the mid-1990s.

Since then, the *interpretive qualitative research* approach, focusing on the self-reflective nature of how qualitative research is conducted, read, and advanced, has become much more dominant in the qualitative discourse, and has, in many ways, been integrated into the core of qualitative inquiry. The role of the researcher, the person reading a textual passage, and the individuals from whom qualitative data are collected play a more central role in researchers' design decisions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Some researchers have called for a methodological dialogue to address questions of disciplinary power, theoretical future of the field, alternative theoretical approaches, discontinuance of conceptual traditions, new methods of training and preparation, and alternative writing and publication possibilities (Koro-Ljungberg & Greckhamer, 2005). I see this trend coming largely from ethnography, but writers in grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), narrative research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) have certainly embraced this interpretive "turn." To incorporate different theoretical approaches and to speak to the power of discourse in qualitative research is certainly necessary. Not all writers, however, have embraced the self-referential component of the interpretive approach. For example, Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont (2003) have recently written about the dangers of forgetting the disciplinary traditions of ethnography: "We believe that too much contemporary work advocates and celebrates self-referential work, with little relevance to our understanding of actual social worlds." (p. xi). I agree. The focus of all qualitative research needs to be on understanding the phenomenon being explored rather than solely on the reader, the researcher, or the participants being studied. But the interpretive stance has much to offer. Thus, for each of the approaches discussed in this book, I now reflect on interpretive elements of procedures. These interpretive aspects also inform how I view the basic design of qualitative research found in Chapter 3. In addition, I brought up to the front of the book the philosophical and theoretical discussion (Chapter 2) so that it can help frame all other discussions about qualitative research.

Some have argued that the purpose of qualitative research should be to advance a social justice agenda (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). While one needs to acknowledge that our society has become more diverse, cognizant of underrepresented groups, and educated about racial and ethnic tensions, not all qualitative projects *must* have this agenda as a central feature. All studies should acknowledge and recognize these issues as part of all inquiry and actively write about them. The passages on data collection in this book focus on the sensitivity required to collect data among diverse samples and the strategies that inform these procedures.