An introduction to qualitative research

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Aim
To introduce you to some of the key concepts that can be found within qualitative research literature.

Objectives
1. Develop awareness of key concepts. These will include: paradigms, theories, methodologies and methods.

2. Increase understanding of what qualitative research is about.

3. Widen appreciation of the strengths of conducting qualitative research.

4. Instil that THERE IS NOT A SINGLE MONOLITHIC APPROACH TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH.
What does qualitative research look like?

The purpose of qualitative research is to understand the social world as seen from a particular person’s (a single case study) or people’s point of view. Qualitative researchers aim to capture the voice and experiences of other people and understand the world from their perspective.
Qualitative research documents may have some of the following characteristics:

Lots of direct quotations from the people who are being studied
Rich descriptions of what is being explored.
Details about interactions between people.
Lots of reporting of people’s behaviour and actions.
In-depth accounts of people’s experiences, opinions and feelings.
Personal accounts by the researcher of the research process and her/his thoughts about what is being studied.
The style of writing is less ‘academic.’
Sociologist John Lofland

Qualitative researchers must get close enough to the people and situation being studied in order to understand in depth what goes on.

They must aim to capture what takes place and what people say: the perceived facts.

Qualitative data must include description of people, activities, interactions and settings.

Must use direct quotations.
EXERCISE 1
Read the following papers handed out and decide whether you think a qualitative researcher writes it.
Naturalistic inquiry
Qualitative research is often naturalistic because it takes place in social settings. Qualitative researchers tend not to use controlled experimental designs.

Emergent design
Qualitative designs usually cannot be prescriptively set out in advance. Designs often specify an initial focus and initial plans for observing and/or interviewing but require sufficient flexibility so that the precise conduct of the exploration unfolds and emerges as the fieldwork progresses. This is to take account of the inductive nature of the inquiry.
EXERCISE 2
Take a study of students of an introduction to qualitative research methods class. The researcher starts to interview separately the first three students (2 female and 1 male). The three students raise the issue of ‘boredom,’ which was not considered when the researcher initially designed the research protocol. In particular, the two females raise the issue of boredom. The researcher now wishes to include this topic in further interviews and wishes to include more women than men in her sample so that she can study the relationship between boredom and the female gender in more depth.

What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of allowing for an emergent design in this case?
Small sample
Qualitative research often focuses on a small number of case studies – a specific social setting – a pub, nursing homes, a group of people - so that it or they can be explored in-depth. Qualitative researchers aim to be information-rich and usually do not claim to be able to generalise from such a small sample but they do say that we can learn a great deal from this kind of research.

Fieldwork
Qualitative researchers like to be up close and personal. They like to immerse themselves in the setting, without going native. They need to be able to empathise with the people who they are studying so that they can develop an understanding of these people’s values, thoughts and feelings. This means that researchers need to develop a cognitive understanding of the social world and connect at some emotional level (not that cognition and emotion are separate states).
EXERCISE 3

The power of researcher INTUITION?
2 students that do not know each other. What can they tell about each other?

Married?
Committed a crime?
Have kids?
Who they vote for?
Job they do/did?
Prefer Glasgow or Edinburgh?
Attitude towards Iraq war?
ETC.
Deduction
This is when a researcher has a pre-conceived theory or hypothesis and then looks at the data she/he has collected and decides whether or not this theory is validated or invalidated. For example, a researcher carried out a pilot study of a qualitative research methods class. She found that female students are bored because there were not enough examples given. The researcher then designs a further study in order to test out this theory. She collects and analyses the data and decides that the theory is in fact disproved. Female students are bored because there are too many examples. In other words, she analyses her data with a pre-conceived theory, something that was antecedently known and analyses the data in order to test her hypothesis.
**Induction**
This is when a researcher has no a priori theories. Instead, categories, concepts and theories emerge out of the data. She brings into being a theory that comes from the empirical data. The methodology associated with this approach is called **grounded theory**.

Qualitative researchers tend to carry out inductive analysis of their data.

**QUESTION**
Once a theory has emerged through inductive analysis does this mean that in other future research it is tested deductively?
Definitions

A **paradigm** is a conceptual framework within which theories are constructed.

Another word for paradigm is **worldview**.

A **theory** is an explanation about the social world.

Theories are developed to help us understand why something happens or why something exists the way that it does. Researchers use empirical evidence either to develop theories (induction) or to prove existing theories (deduction).
A **method** is a way of accomplishing an end.  
A **research method** is a way of obtaining primary or secondary data about the social world.  

A **methodology** is a system of methods and principles that are used to explore the social world.  

Social scientists do not agree on what is a paradigm or a methodology. Take the concept ‘ethnography’ – this is sometimes referred to as a paradigm or a methodology.
EXERCISE 4
Take one of the concepts that you know from the list above and then answer the following questions.

For example,

1. What is the worldview of a Marxist?
2. What theories do Marxists explicate?
3. Are any research methods particularly associated with Marxism?
4. What would a Marxist methodology look like if there were such a thing?
An **ontological** question relevant to research is: what is the nature of reality? Is there a ‘real’ world that exists outside our heads? Is reality, as we know it solely a human construct?

**Reality-oriented researchers**
If you think that a real world exists you will try to study that real world. You will try to get as near to the ‘truth’ about that world as possible. You will be a **realist** researcher. You may acknowledge that there are competing interpretations of reality and you may try to describe these competing viewpoints in your research.

Social construction
People construct reality. It is not real in any absolute sense but is perceived and experienced as real by people. People construct knowledge about reality and as such there exist multiple realities. According to this view, ‘truth’ is not about corresponding with an objective reality but about a consensus among constructors of knowledge of that reality. Some post-modernists draw the conclusion that there is no such thing as the ‘truth’ about the world instead, you think that there are multiple realities that are constructed by individuals. You will be a relativist.

In history battle lines were drawn between ‘hard’ realists and ‘hard’ relativists over the question of the holocaust. Did it happen? Yes, according to the realists. Yes and no according to the hard relativists.
Michael Crotty

‘What the “commonsense” view commends to us is that the tree standing before us is a tree. It has all the meaning we ascribe to a tree. It would be a tree, with that same meaning, whether anyone knew of its existence or not. We need to remind ourselves here that it is human being who have constructed it as a tree, given it a name, and attributed to it the associations we make with trees. It may help if we recall the extent to which those associations differ even within the same overall culture. “Tree” is likely to bear quite different connotations in a logging town, an artists’ settlement and a treeless slum.’

QUESTION
Can you simultaneously adopt a realist and a social constructionist approach?
What would your ontological statement about the social world be?

For a more in-depth philosophical discussion about research:
Guba, E and Lincoln Y, 1994 (though there is a 2000 edition)
‘Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research’
*Handbook of Qualitative Research* editors, Denzin, N and Lincoln Y,
EXERCISE 5
Do you think that whether you like the researcher will make a difference to what you tell him or her?

Do you think that you would tell a female researcher something different to a male researcher?

Do you think that the way people dress makes a difference to how you perceive them?

Do you think that your non-verbal communication influences whether they feel comfortable?
The role of the researcher

If you are a realist researcher you are seeking to get as close to the ‘truth’ about the real social world as you possibly can. This means that you will try to eliminate any bias in the research process. For example, you will put your own personal values and viewpoints to one side. You will attempt to explore the social world by avoiding influencing it in any way. In other words, you will try to be as objective as possible. You want your research to be plausible and credible.

Many realist researchers acknowledge that it is impossible to do this and so they engage in reflectivity, which means that they make explicit the ways in which they have influenced the research.
The role of the researcher

If you are a relativist researcher you believe that research findings are co-constructed by the researcher and the researched throughout the research process. You do not claim that it is anything other than this and that your interpretation of the social world is not any more credible than another’s.
Ethnography
• Primary methodology/paradigm of anthropology
• Describes ‘a people’ and/or ‘a culture’
• To understand ‘other’
• ‘Exotic’ cultures studies at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.
• Urban cultures of today. For example, Paul Willis’ study in the 1970s ‘Learning to Labour’.
Auto-ethnography

Carolyn Ellis

‘I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I’ve lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life.’

Phenomenology

How people experience phenomena – a job, an act, an emotion – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, make sense of it. Phenomenology is about finding out about the lived experience. This is because people can only know what they experience. This can be experiencing a punch in the face or experiencing thinking about an abstract thought such as answering the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’

Researchers tend to carry out in-depth interviews with one of more people so that they get to the essence of a phenomenon. The research report is about the lived experience of a people, which captures the essence of the phenomenon under study.
Van Manen 1990:10
‘From a phenomenological point of view, we are less interested in the factual status of particular instances: whether something happened, how often it tends to happen, or how the occurrence of an experience is related to the prevalence of other conditions or events. For example, phenomenology does not ask, “How do these children learn this particular material?” but it asks, “what is the nature or essence of the experience of learning (so that I can now better understand what this particular learning experience is like for these children)?”

Heuristics is a form of phenomenological inquiry that brings to the fore the personal experience and insights of the researcher. The research report is a report of the lived experience of the researcher, which captures the essence of the phenomenon under study.

Ethnomethodology
Whereas heuristic inquiry focuses on issues of personal interest to the researcher, ethnomethodology focus on everyday life, the ordinary, the routine, the taken for granted. The sociologist most associated with this approach is Garfinkel.

EXERCISE 6
Give examples of the subject matter that an ethnomethodologist would be interested in researching.
Symbolic interactionism
Shared meanings
Interactions between people
Interpretation of one’s own and other’s social action to create meaning

Putting it crudely
Ethnographers focus on culture
Ethnomethodologists on everyday life
Symbolic interactionists on meaning through interactions
Phenomenologists on the lived experience.
READING
