

CHAPTER 5

Frameworks for Qualitative Research

There are many ironies in qualitative research. One of the most interesting is that although selecting the right research method is far less important to qualitative researchers than it is to those with a quantitative bent, the field has produced an unbelievable number of research methods. For many qualitative researchers it is their general framework or paradigm that is most important to them. If they are devoted to a particular research method, it is often because that method is an expression of their paradigm.

If paradigms or frameworks are a central issue for qualitative researchers, why are there so many ways to do qualitative research? Do qualitative researchers place a primary emphasis on methodology? Perhaps some do, but another reason for the proliferation of research methods is that qualitative researchers have a number of conceptual frameworks from which to choose. These frameworks have much in common, but there are also many differences. Those differences often lead to the development and use of different research methods. The situation in qualitative research contrasts somewhat with the postpositivist paradigm, as you will see in the next section. There is more paradigm diversity in the qualitative genre than in the quantitative approach.

Postpositivist Research

Postpositivism has developed a detailed and highly technical approach to the process of conducting research. This approach matured and evolved

over the 20th century. Postpositivist social science research at the beginning of the 21st century involves six basic steps:

1. *Find an idea you want to research.* Your idea for research can come from anywhere, even your experiences, or qualitative data you or someone else has collected.

2. *Develop or select a theory about the area you want to research.* It can be a metatheory that is grand and all encompassing, a midlevel theory that covers a single aspect of human behavior such as learning, or a minitheory such as learned helplessness (Peterson, Mailer, & Seligman, 1995) that predicts behavior only under certain conditions. (Note: Sometimes you pick a theory first and then look for an area to test it, so steps 1 and 2 may be reversed.)

3. *Develop specific, testable hypotheses* that derive from your theory. The hypotheses should be empirically testable, and they should be clear-cut derivations from the basic or core tenets of the theory you selected. This is often called the hypothetico-deductive model (Yore, Hand, & Florence, 2004).

4. *Design a scientific study* to objectively gather quantitative data under controlled conditions that allow you to draw conclusions about your hypotheses.

5. *Analyze the data* using standard statistical techniques and interpret the results using the guidelines of the scientific method. Using the postpositivist concept of *falsification*, a positive outcome must be reported as supporting the theory being tested. However, no study or series of studies can ever *prove* beyond any doubt that a theory is true. Falsification is potentially more plausible as a way of interpreting research results because the theory you are testing should be universal. Thus, any demonstration that it is inaccurate demonstrates it is false. On the other hand, a result that corresponds to the predictions of a hypothesis is simply *supportive* because a particular study is never an exhaustive test of the hypothesis. There could be other conditions under which the data would show the hypothesis to be false. However, not all postpositivists seem to accept falsification. D. C. Phillips, a leading proponent of the postpositivist paradigm in educational research, remarks (Phillips & Burbules, 2000) that “practical consequences often follow from the findings of educational research, and it behooves the researcher or evaluator to be certain that his or her account is not fiction and is not merely ‘one reading’ of many that are theoretically possible concerning the situation under investigation. It should be a good reading, a true reading” (p. 76). However, Phillips goes on to distinguish “a true reading” from a True reading of the data. “Those who believe (as we do) that

researchers should aim to discover the truth often are accused of thinking that there is *one* ('absolute') truth. But this is, of course, nonsense." Phillips argues that the point of view or the focus of a particular research study can be different from that of another even when they are studying the same topic. For example, someone on the fifth floor of a building might say that the third story is "below" them, and someone on the second story would say it is "above" them. Both have made a true statement about the situation. What Phillips seems to be missing is that many of the differences in statements about the outcomes of research are based on paradigmatic differences, not simple points of view. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, studies of the psychological stability of homosexuals found that they were not as "well adjusted" as heterosexual people of similar backgrounds and age. Those who conducted their research assuming that homosexuality was a deviant and pathological personality trait treated the results as confirming their original viewpoint. Those who believed homosexuality was one of many "normal" sexual preferences saw the results as confirming the premise that society's rejection and persecution of homosexuals naturally led to difficulties adjusting in a hostile environment. The first and second editions of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)* classified homosexuality as a disease. However, the third edition, which came out in 1976, classified homosexuality as a normal variation in sexual preference (the committee was influenced significantly by both the protests of gay rights groups and by respected gay psychiatrists). The current edition, *DSM-IV*, published in 2000, also considers homosexuality a normal variation, but practitioners who still consider it a disease use the more generic diagnosis "sexual disorder not otherwise specified." The change in *DSM-III* was not due to new research that refuted existing empirical studies; it was due to change in the underlying assumptions and beliefs of psychiatric researchers and practitioners. This is one of many such examples of a shift in psychological truths that have occurred over the past 100 years (another is the shift in the explanation of autism from "cold parents" to neurological factors). It is difficult to accept Phillips's assertion that "the problem for us researchers (assuming we are doing educational research and not gathering ideas for a novel) is, first, to comprehend. . . . There is a 'truth of the matter' . . . [and] it is our job to uncover it if we can" (p. 78). He then proposes that we move "not to the rigor mortis of relativism but to the rigor that is needed in a competent inquiry" (p. 78). Phillips goes on to make a strong case for the idea that finding truth, not understanding, is the goal of social science research. But he also calls on the authority of Sir Karl Popper, attributing to him the statement that "any fool can always find some evidence to support a favored theory" (p. 80), and Phillips then comments that

“what serves as more genuine support is that no evidence can be found to *disprove* the account that is being given; it is up to the person giving the interpretation to convince the rest of us that such negative evidence has been sought vigorously” (p. 80). Thus, Phillips does seem to be accepting falsification. However, his writing is slippery on this point, as is his advocacy of truth as the goal of research. Near the end of his book he talks about *warrant* rather than proof and about beliefs that are *warranted* rather than truths that are proven. “The postpositivist approach to research is based on seeking appropriate and adequate warrants for conclusions, on hewing to standards of truth and falsity, that subject hypotheses (of whatever type) to test and thus potential disconfirmation, and on being open-minded about criticism” (pp. 86–87). “We need disciplined, competent inquiry to establish which of our beliefs are warranted and which are chimerical. And the philosophy that will serve us best in our endeavor is *postpositivism*” (p. 92). (Note: Although Phillips’s approach is more common among quantitative researchers, there are qualitative researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994a) who insist that they too are searching for truth, just as there are some quantitative researchers who use a critical or interpretive framework.)

6. *Report your work* in an objective manner. Typically the form of this report is a journal article, but larger studies may also be published as a monograph or book. Zigler and Muenchow’s (1992) book on the impact of Head Start, the American preschool program for poor children, is an example of a book based on a large research study. That book was written for a lay as well as a professional audience. Many books based on research are written primarily for other scholars and academics. For example, the monograph (Crawford, 1990) on the Byzantine shops in the ancient city of Sardis is unlikely to make it to the *New York Times* hardcover bestseller list, but it is of immense interest to other specialists.

As has been noted many times, the positivist and postpositivist approach is based on a number of givens or foundational beliefs. One of the most important is that it is possible through the scientific method to study and learn about the real or external world. A supporting corollary is that there are basic rules and laws of human behavior in that world that we can discover. Qualitative research has an interesting history that shows it has, at times, taken on those same foundational beliefs.

Moments of Qualitative Research

It is not a method or research technique that determines whether something is qualitative research; it is how the study is conceived, what is to be

accomplished, and how the data are understood. This question of what constitutes qualitative research is made more complex by the number of paradigms that can serve as foundations for qualitative research. Qualitative research emerged in the past century as a useful framework for social science research, but its history has not been the story of steady, sustained progress along one path. Denzin and Lincoln (1994, 2005) divide the history of 20th-century qualitative social science research, broadly defined, into eight moments.

The Traditional Period (Early 1900s–World War II)

During this period other cultures were studied from the perspective of the researcher's own culture. The classic ethnographic method involved going into another culture, making field notes of observations, and then writing conclusions. The works of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson reflect this period.

What the anthropologist was seeking was a positivist understanding of the way things really were, and there was thus a concern with providing "valid, reliable, and objective interpretations" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 7). The four characteristics of this period of qualitative research were each the foundation for a reaction against this form of traditional postpositivist research.

- *A commitment to objectivism* was rejected later by interpretivists and postmodernists. Humans cannot get an objective, God's-eye view of the world. They are always influenced by their own experiences and culture.
- *Complicity in imperialism* was rejected by critical theorists who sought to uncover and make obvious the domination and subjugation of other cultures by the imperialist powers. Research during this period often supported imperialist notions.
- *The belief in monumentalism* ("ethnography would create a museum like picture of the culture studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 7) was rejected by interpretivists because context is critical to understanding, so knowledge is local rather than universal. It was also rejected by the critical theorists because the conclusions presented were those of the dominant cultures that were imposed on those without power. "Today this image [of objectivism in fieldwork] has been shattered. The works of the classic ethnographers are seen by many as relics of the colonial past" (p. 7).
- Finally, *a belief in the timelessness or universal nature of findings* was rejected for the same reason monumentalism was. The truths of a

particular study are not necessarily the only truths of the present, much less the future.

The Modernist Phase (1940s–1970s)

A core characteristic of the second moment of qualitative research was an attempt to put qualitative research on the same footing as quantitative—to make it a quantitative, objective, and statistical approach. “Thus did work in the modernist period clothe itself in the language and rhetoric of positivist and postpositivist discourse. This was the golden age of rigorous qualitative analysis” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 8). The modernist phase attempted to improve on qualitative research as a method for accomplishing the goals of traditional period research. This approach remains a significant influence on qualitative research today. It is probably best represented in the work of Miles and Huberman (1994a, 1994b). They divide qualitative research methods and analysis procedures into two broad categories: “loose, inductively oriented designs, and ‘tight,’ more deductively approached ones” (1994a, p. 431).

The former work well when the terrain is unfamiliar and/or excessively complex, a single case is involved, and the intent is exploratory and descriptive. Tighter designs are indicated when the researcher has good prior acquaintance with the setting, has a good bank of applicable, well-delineated concepts, and takes a more explanatory and/or confirmatory stance involving multiple, comparable cases. (p. 431)

Like traditional positivist and postpositivist researchers, Miles and Huberman tend to put the types of qualitative research methods covered in this book on the periphery of research; they see them as things you can do before you start to do “real” research. This is a convenient approach because postpositivism does not insist that the theories and predictions to be tested come from any particular source. Thus, concluding that less structured approaches to qualitative research can be good sources of ideas for more rigorous studies does not conflict with postpositivism because any source is acceptable.

Blurred Genres (1970s–1986)

Denzin and Lincoln’s (1994) third moment marks the maturing of qualitative research.

Qualitative researchers had a full complement of paradigms, methods, and strategies to employ in their research. Theories ranged from symbolic interactionism to constructivism, naturalistic inquiry, positivism and postpositivism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, critical (Marxist), semiotics, structuralism, feminism, and various ethnic paradigms. . . . Research strategies ranged from grounded theory to the case study, to methods of historical, biographical, ethnographic, action and clinical research. (p. 9)

Denzin and Lincoln credit sociologist Clifford Geertz with shaping this moment. Two of his books, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, published in 1973 at the beginning of this moment, and *Local Knowledge* (Geertz, 1983), published near the end, are still cited as valuable sources of perspective and method.

Essentially Geertz argues for an approach to social science research that rejects all four of the foundations of the traditional period (objectivism, imperialism, monumentalism, and timelessness). He proposes a social science based in “thick” descriptions and an approach that emphasizes seeking multiple perspectives, interpretive rather than positivist explanations and purposes, open-ended methods (Miles and Huberman’s “loose” qualitative research methods), and the situatedness of knowing (the idea that we understand only in context).

With the arrival of this moment, “the golden age of the social sciences was over, and a new age of blurred, interpretive genres was upon us. The essay as an art form was replacing the scientific article” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 9).

Crisis of Representation (Mid-1980s)

Social science leaders in this moment came to recognize that their methods, and the methods of a quantitative social science, were never going to represent a singular reality. Feminist and critical epistemologies grew in influence during this period, and the influence of traditional research methods that led us to some form of universal truth decreased.

Gathering data and writing up those data were generally separate activities until this moment. That approach was abandoned by some because data collection is determined in part by what we write and vice versa. Instead it became more acceptable to view

writing as a method of inquiry that moves through successive stages of self-reflection. As a series of writings, the field-worker’s texts flow

from the field experience, through intermediate works, to later work, and finally to the research text that is the public presentation of the ethnographic and narrative experience. Thus do fieldwork and writing blur into one another. There is, in the final analysis no difference between writing and fieldwork. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 10)

A Triple Crisis (Today)

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) argue that the social sciences are in the middle of three crises today. They have to do with representation, legitimation, and praxis. The crisis of representation is about the inability of qualitative researchers to present in their written reports the lived experiences of those they study. Instead, “such experience . . . is created in the social text written by the researcher” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 19). The second crisis, that of legitimation, is about warrant: What warrants our attention and why? In traditional positivist research warrant is about validity and reliability, but these concepts do not transfer over to many forms of qualitative research. The legitimation crisis thus addresses the question, “How are qualitative studies to be evaluated in the contemporary, poststructural moment” (p. 20)? Positivist research has the well-established and technically developed concepts of validity and reliability and a host of statistical and methodological procedures for establishing them. Qualitative research does not have one way of establishing warrant, it has many, and they are sometimes contradictory, debated, and dependent on different ideologies. The field of qualitative research has not yet arrived at a consensus on how to decide what warrants our attention and what does not.

The third crisis, that of praxis or practice, arises out of the first two and addresses the question, “Is it possible to effect change in the world if society is only and always a text?” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 20). That is, if the results of our research are no more than a text that was created by the researcher and we have no established way of deciding which of many texts—views, perspectives, and understandings of human behavior and social life—warrant our attention, how can we actually bring about change in the world? Denzin and Lincoln propose that these three crises, of representation, legitimation, and praxis, are the background for four more moments in qualitative research. On further reflection and some distance from the period, Denzin and Lincoln may well decide that these four additional periods are less moments than aspects of a single, if complex, effort to deal with the maturing of qualitative research that must do more than react against positivist research. Before, the field was able to establish an identity by being against positivist methods and ideology while proposing

alternatives. Now, however, it is becoming institutionalized rather than being on the outside of the power structure. And as institutionalization progresses, there is a growing need to reach some shared beliefs beyond simply being against positivism. That theme characterizes moments 6 through 8.

The Fifth or Postmodern Moment

In this moment qualitative researchers tried to deal with the crises of representation, legitimation, and praxis in a number of ways, from reporting their research in different ways to supporting the participation through the writing of members of groups that were traditionally silenced. The moment is characterized by further shifts from the idea of a research paper reflecting the reality of a particular context to the idea of the research paper as narrative and storytelling. And just as different people tell different stories, so do different qualitative methods. That is one of two major features of this moment. The other is an abandonment of the researcher as an aloof, privileged person who can decide what is true. There is movement toward an emphasis on cooperation and collaboration that

- Blurs the line between the researcher and the researched, with participation by all throughout the research process
- Operates in the real world instead of in artificially structured and simplified environments
- Includes both critiques of what is and efforts to change what is through “more action, participatory and activist-oriented research” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 20)

In this context, any efforts to produce definitive statements of the way things are or to present a researcher’s work as objective truth were abandoned. “The search for grand narratives was being replaced by more local, small-scale theories fitted to specific problems and specific situations” (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 20).

The Sixth or Postexperimental Inquiry Moment (1995–2000)

This period was characterized by high levels of excitement, new publishing options for qualitative scholars, and the encouragement of new ways of communicating qualitative research that does not make a strong distinction between social science and the humanities. For perhaps the first time there were publication outlets for social science scholarship expressed in poetry, drama, performative, visual, multimedia, and conversational modes.

The Seventh or Methodologically Contested Moment (2000–2004)

In this period a number of qualitative journals began publishing, but the period was one of conflict and anxiety as the field developed institutional components such as journals and thus needed ways of achieving consensus on topics such as how to decide which articles to publish.

The Eighth Moment: Methodological Backlash (2005–?)

When George W. Bush became president of the United States, he brought with him a group of social scientists and policymakers who imposed on the federal funding and support structure a decidedly positivist mode of thought. For social science and for projects aimed at dealing with the problems of education, poverty, and society in general, this meant that research tended to be narrowly defined as quantitative and experimental in the positivist, experimental tradition. To make an argument for a theory or intervention that was not accepted by the Bush team, the coin of the realm was high-quality experimental research. However, that was no guarantee of being heard because while the administration was demanding experimental research, it was also rejecting the results of just such research when it did not agree with the administration's ideology and when it would disturb groups that strongly supported the administration. The result was a period in which supposedly neutral scientific groups were stacked with administration supporters, reports from some scientific groups were actually rewritten by nonscientists in the Bush administration, and some government agencies produced "news reports" that were broadcast on cooperating television stations as if they were legitimate news done by real reporters instead of by public relations operatives producing propaganda. The administration even secretly paid fees (i.e., bribes) to supposedly independent journalists and media outlets to flog the administration's perspective. In all likelihood most administrations have been guilty of at least some selectivity in terms of the science they accept and promote, but the degree of duplicity by the Bush administration sets a new bar.

Denzin and Lincoln end their 1994 history of qualitative research with four conclusions (with a fifth added in their 2005 edition):

- "Each of the earlier historical moments is still operating in the present, either as legacy or as a set of practices that researchers still follow or argue against" (1994, p. 11).
- "An embarrassment of choices now characterizes the field of qualitative research. There have never been so many paradigms, strategies of inquiry, or methods of analysis to draw upon and utilize" (1994, p. 11).

- “We are in a moment of discovery and rediscovery, as new ways of looking, interpreting, arguing, and writing are debated and discussed” (1994, p. 11).
- “The qualitative research act can no longer be viewed from within a neutral, or objective, positivist perspective” (1994, p. 11). “Class, race, gender, and ethnicity shape inquiry, making research a multicultural process” (2005, p. 20).
- “We are not saying that the cutting edge is located in the present. We are saying that the present is a politically charged space. Complex pressures both within and outside of the qualitative community are working to erase the positive developments of the past 30 years” (2005, p. 20).

Denzin and Lincoln describe a dynamic, complex, confusing, and contradictory context for qualitative social science research today. We could wish for a context that is less confusing, more settled when it comes to foundational issues, and with fewer contradictions, but that is not the present. However, there are a number of general frameworks for approaching qualitative research. Actually, there are many, but only a few of the major ones are explored here.

Article of Interest

Martyn Hammersley. (1999). Not bricolage but boatbuilding: Exploring two metaphors for thinking about ethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(5), 574–585.

Ethnography is a general term for research that involves observation in the field. The ethnographer may be observing the child-rearing patterns of a Pacific island tribe or the pickup lines used in a New York City bar, but in each setting the study will involve observing behavior in the natural context. This article focuses on the future of ethnographic research, but the ideas and conclusions can also apply to other forms of qualitative research. Hammersley begins with Denzin and Lincoln's fifth moment and their use of the concept of researcher as bricoleur or “jack-of-all-trades.” He then questions whether the bricoleur metaphor is an appropriate one for a social science researcher. Hammersley prefers another metaphor, that of sailors rebuilding a ship while at sea, which he borrows from German sociologist Otto Neurath. He uses the contrast between bricolage and boatbuilding to raise an issue that concerns him. It is that whereas bricolage allows you to use and accept ideas and concepts that are contradictory or at cross purposes, boatbuilding does not allow you to design one part of the boat as a canoe and another part as a

Mississippi River steamboat. The boat will sink. Hammersley's vision of social science is one that is less influenced by the humanities ("we need to keep our distance from the others if we are to avoid collisions," p. 580), and that means doing research and writing in ways that clearly distinguish social science from literature or political journalism. He is also concerned with the loss of some positivist values such as "the obligation to produce value-relevant knowledge" (p. 581), and he believes that "denying that such knowledge is possible . . . represents a flouting of that obligation as generally understood" (p. 581). He longs for more certainty and more confidence in the results of social science research than the interpretivists allow. Using an interesting adaptation of a Wittgensteinian concept, he suggests that even though we cannot be sure of solid foundations, we should proceed as if we are and take them as givens. Thus, Hammersley argues that we should reject antirealism, subjectivism, and skepticism in favor of realism, even if we cannot be confident of our choice.

To read the entire article, please go to http://www.sagepub.com/willis_aoi.

Some General Frameworks for Qualitative Research

A framework is a set of broad concepts that guide research. Researchers working within interpretivist and critical paradigms have a number of frameworks from which to choose. From among the many available this chapter describes several that appeal to a number of researchers today. The first is analytic realism, which seeks to build a framework that is compatible with both critical and interpretivist paradigms.

Altheide and Johnson's Analytic Realism

Altheide and Johnson (1994) address the question of what criteria we should use to evaluate interpretive qualitative research. They point out that within the qualitative research community there are several approaches to deciding what warrants our attention, such as postpositivism, critical theory, and constructivism (interpretivism). They propose an alternative that is based on analytic realism with a general method called reflexive ethnography. "Analytic realism is an approach to qualitative data analysis and writing. It is founded on the view that the social world is an interpreted world. . . . Analytic realism rejects the dichotomy of realism/idealism, and other conceptual dualisms, as being incompatible with the nature of lived experience, and its interpretation" (p. 489).

They propose that reflexive qualitative research must attend to five different issues (the following list is an adaptation of Altheide and Johnson's list, which uses different terms for most of the issues):

- *Contextualization.* The relationship between what is observed and the larger context is critical.
- *Interaction.* The researcher, by being there, changes the setting and may well develop relationships with the participants. This is not bad, but it should all be spelled out and explained in the research report.
- *Perspective.* Some qualitative research is done from one perspective (e.g., union members who are striking while others are hired by the company to keep the plant open). At other times the research may include multiple perspectives (the new workers, the striking workers, the state's governor, and the company). Regardless of whether the research includes one or multiple perspectives, it is important to keep in mind that whatever is presented is a perspective and not truth in a postpositivist sense.
- *Reader roles.* If the purpose of a research report is not to pass on truth to readers, what is it for? If it is understanding rather than truth, the reader will play a major role in constructing meaning from the report. The roles you expect the readers to play should be kept in mind as you conduct your research, analyze your data, and communicate your results.
- *Style.* Until recently the typical research report was almost always a 10- to 30-page scholarly paper (or, occasionally, a monograph). Although papers are still important, the qualitative researcher may report findings in many diverse ways: a one-act play, a painting, a novel, a short story, a sculpture, a short video, or a multimedia document on the Web.

Altheide and Johnson's (1994) chapter goes on to discuss a number of issues related to what some would call validity in qualitative research. Their approach is somewhat similar to that of Denzin (1994) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994).

Article of Interest

Sharon Turnbull. (2002). Bricolage as an alternative approach to human resource development theory building. *Human Resource Development Review*, 1(1), 111–128.

In this article, Sharon Turnbull, a human resources scholar at Lancaster University, looks at the current debate in the field of human resources that pits positivists against constructivists (e.g., interpretivists) in her field of research. Her goal is to build theories concerning human resource development that reflect an understanding of the local context studied but will be helpful to others working

in similar contexts. She believes the positivist–constructivist divide can be bridged using the concept of bricolage. In building her case Turnbull discusses alternative ways of increasing the believability or trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry, and she uses one of her case studies to demonstrate how bricolage can be used in an applied research context. The case study used Altheide and Johnson’s framework of analytic realism. As you read this article, notice how the author determined what is real and should be reported. Are the results of a study based on analytic realism more like the “real” results of a postpositivist study or more like the results of a study that assumes all findings are subjective and contextual? Why?

To read the entire article, please go to http://www.sagepub.com/willis_aoi.

Denzin and Lincoln’s Interpretive Perspective

Norman Denzin is a sociologist who writes extensively on qualitative research methods. He is also an editor of the journal *Qualitative Inquiry*. He advocates an alternative approach to deciding whether a qualitative study warrants our attention (Denzin, 1994). He begins with the assertion that postpositivism is being rejected and that the emphasis on objective research is untenable. “The age of putative value-free social science appears to be over. Accordingly, . . . any discussion of this process must become political, personal, and experiential” (p. 501).

For Denzin and other interpretivists, collection and interpretation of qualitative data on humans are inherently subjective. No matter how close we come to meeting detailed technical standards for research, the result is not an objective report of the truth of the matter.

Denzin (1994) describes some of the basics of interpretive research, especially data analysis. He views interpretation as

an art; it is not formulaic or mechanical. It can be learned, like any form of storytelling only through doing. . . . Fieldworkers can neither make sense of nor understand what has been learned until they sit down and write the interpretive text, telling the story first to themselves, and then to their significant others, and then to the public. (p. 502)

When it comes to judging whether a study warrants our attention, Denzin (1994) suggests that the values we use to make that decision are ideological, political, moral, and personal. What is considered good research varies from paradigm to paradigm and perspective to perspective. “If the

paradigm is positivist or postpositivist, the writer will present a text that stresses variables, hypotheses, and propositions derived from a particular theory that sees the world in terms of causes and effects" (p. 502). On the other hand, an interpretive or phenomenologically based text "would emphasize socially constructed realities, local generalizations, interpretive resources, stocks of knowledge, intersubjectivity, practical reasoning, and ordinary talk" (p. 502). Critical researchers focus on "the importance of terms such as action, structure, culture, and power, which are then fitted into a general model of society" (p. 502). And if the researcher works from a feminist perspective he or she "will attempt to tell a situated story stressing gender, reflexivity, emotion, and an action orientation" (p. 503).

According to Denzin (1994), qualitative research reports usually represent the multiple perspectives that are inherent in most human endeavors. They also provide detailed explications of the context in which the research was conducted. Finally, although Denzin offers some general guidelines for deciding whether research warrants our attention, he points to other nonresearch sources as the real frames that are used to judge qualitative research: "personal, interpersonal, economic, occupational, and rhetorical" (p. 503).

In a chapter coauthored with Yvonna Lincoln, a scholar at Texas A&M University (Lincoln & Denzin, 1994), they attempt to predict the future of qualitative research. In the current situation, the emphasis is on paradigms. However, they believe there is a core of common beliefs that will cut across the paradigms and provide a framework for thinking about qualitative research:

There is an illusive center to this contradictory, tension-ridden enterprise that seems to be moving further and further away from grand narratives and single, overarching ontological, epistemological, and methodological paradigms. This center lies in the humanistic commitment of the qualitative researcher to study the world always from the perspective of the interacting individual. From this simple commitment flow the liberal and radical politics of qualitative research. Action, feminist, clinical, constructivist, ethnic, critical, and cultural studies researchers are all united on this point. They all share the belief that a politics of liberation must always begin with the perspectives, desires, and dreams of those individuals and groups who have been oppressed by the larger ideological, economic, and political forces of a society, or a historical moment. (p. 575)

This perspective seems to combine the goals of critical theory and some of the concepts of interpretivism. Lincoln and Denzin point out some of the

issues that need to be addressed if this approach is adopted. For example, they support including participants in the process of research because it is their meaning, their constructed reality, that we are trying to understand.

Eisner's Connoisseurship Model of Inquiry

Eliot Eisner (1997), a professor at Stanford University, has a background in art and art education. He is the leading proponent of a qualitative research approach generally known as connoisseurship. It draws on methods from the arts and humanities and is an alternative to the postpositivist framework. Although Eisner is particularly concerned with qualitative research in education, his ideas apply to other types of qualitative research as well.

Eisner's approach is interpretive, but he makes room for critical approaches as well. In fact, his model has two major components: connoisseurship and criticism. Together, they constitute inquiry.

I used inquiry rather than research and evaluation because I wish to include . . . efforts to reveal not only the qualities of classrooms and schools, but also the processes of teaching; teaching is a form of qualitative inquiry. In addition, inquiry is a broader concept than either research or evaluation. Research and evaluation are examples of inquiry, but not all inquiry is an example of research or evaluation. (Eisner, 1997, p. 6)

One characteristic of Eisner's approach is breadth. He advocates many different forms of qualitative inquiry, from writing fiction, to criticism in the style of the art or music critic, to quantitative research. He also advocates the use of many different forms of reporting, from plays, musical scores, paintings, and theatrical performances to traditional scholarly papers. In addition, he treats the communication of results not as an exercise in objective science but rather as a "magical and mysterious feat through which the content of our consciousness is given public form" (1997, p. 1). As you have probably already concluded, Eisner is a bit too fuzzy and metaphysical for postpositivists.

Eisner lists seven basic premises or givens that are the foundation for his model of qualitative research. They can also serve as the foundations for interpretive qualitative research in general:

- There are multiple perspectives, or ways of knowing about the world, and both artists and scientists can contribute to our knowledge of the world.

- Human knowledge is constructed, not discovered.
- The forms (e.g., scholarly paper, narrative, play, poem, painting) humans use to communicate their understanding influence what they can say.
- Effective use of any form requires intelligence.
- Selecting a particular form influences not only what we can say about the world but also what we as researchers see.
- Using multiple methods of research makes our studies “more complete and informative” (1997, p. 8).
- The forms that are accepted by the educational research community are determined in part by political as much as epistemological matters.

Eisner’s two aspects of qualitative research, connoisseurship and criticism, are interrelated. A connoisseur is someone who can detect subtle differences in the topic. A wine connoisseur can sometimes tell the difference between wines from grapes in adjacent fields. For Eisner (1997), a connoisseur in research is someone who has the experience and skills to understand the subtle and not so subtle aspects of a situation, aspects that would be completely hidden to an observer who is not a connoisseur. “Connoisseurship is the means through which we come to know the complexities, nuances, and subtleties of aspects of the world in which we have a special interest” (p. 68). For Eisner connoisseurship is a private act. “One can be a connoisseur of fine wine without uttering a word about its quality” (p. 85). However, once the connoisseur communicates his or her views to others, it becomes criticism:

The task of the critic is to perform a mysterious feat well: to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom or school, or act of teaching and learning into a public form that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced. (p. 86)

Criticism in the arts and humanities forms the background for Eisner’s ideas. Criticism may be negative, positive, or a mixture of both. And, like reviewers of a play, different critics may offer quite different criticisms. That is to be expected because different critics look at different aspects of a situation and bring different experiences and different frames of reference to the task. (Anyone who has served as the editor of a scholarly journal will

recognize this pattern. It is not at all unusual for three reviewers of a paper submitted for publication to give the editor radically different recommendations—reject, accept as is, or substantially revise—for the same paper. This happens in all fields, from physics to cultural anthropology, and in both quantitative and qualitative research.)

The four aspects of criticism—description, interpretation, evaluation, and the explication of broad or general themes—are accomplished more through the methods of art and humanities criticism than through the scientific method.

Eisner (1997, pp. 32–40) lists six features of qualitative inquiry (QI) in his model:

- QI tends to be field focused.
- The researcher (self) is a major instrument of research.
- QI is interpretive.
- QI is presented in an expressive voice, with the researcher clearly present in the text. “The kind of detachment that some journals prize—the neutralization of voice, the aversion to metaphor and to adjectives, the absence of the first person singular—is seldom a feature of qualitative studies. We display our signatures” (p. 36).
- QI attends to particulars. Eisner’s form of qualitative research does not, as a primary purpose, attempt to extract out of a study generalizations that can be used in other settings. When that is done, “the flavor of the particular situation, individual, event, or object is lost” (p. 38). This form of qualitative research tries, through providing details, to help the reader understand the topic of study in rich and revealing ways.
- Three criteria for appraising *transactive* accounts are coherence, consensus, and instrumental utility. Because Eisner emphasizes it so much, I have added a fourth criterion to his list: insightfulness.

The idea of transactive accounts requires some comment. Eisner does not see qualitative research as a top-down, subject–object relationship in which the researcher finds the truth about the subject. It is instead a transactive process that is

the locus of human experience. It is the product of the interaction of two postulated entities, the objective and the subjective. Since what we can know about the world is always the result of inquiry, it

is mediated by mind. Since it is mediated by mind, the world cannot be known in its ontologically objective state. . . . Since what we know about the world is a product of the transaction of our subjective life and a postulated objective world, these worlds cannot be separated. (p. 52)

Eisner thus acknowledges that there is an external, objective world, but he denies that humans can ever know it in any absolute sense because our knowledge is the result of a transactive process that includes both objective and subjective elements. For Eisner, all research and all ways of knowing are transactive.

One reason Eisner emphasizes the concept of transactive accounts is to make room for many different sources of knowledge. He is concerned with the emphasis the scientific method places on one form of knowledge: propositional. In the social sciences propositional knowledge takes the general pattern of

If X is true \rightarrow then Y must be true, too.

This abstract expression can be expressed in a basic and applied form:

If the results of the study are $X \rightarrow$ then theory Y must be true (or not true).

If the results of the study are $X \rightarrow$ then the professional practice Y must be true (or not true).

Although Eisner (1997) does not reject propositional knowledge, he does not find it such a useful form of knowledge for thinking about human behavior that it deserves a privileged position. This type of knowledge deals only with truth. For Eisner a broader concept is rightness, and there are many ways to seek rightness. “To dismiss the ways in which literature or poetry inform because they cannot be scientifically tested is to make a category mistake. We can live with many versions of rightness, truth being one” (p. 50).

Eisner’s three criteria for evaluating qualitative research (and all research)—coherence, consensus, and instrumental utility—are essentially replacements for the postpositivists’ concepts of validity and reliability. You could translate the term *validity* into *believability*. Can you believe the results reported? Reliability relates to stability. Are the results stable, or might the scores, results, or other data be quite different the next time the same study is done?

However, it is important to note that Eisner's three criteria are replacements only in the sense that they play similar roles in the interpretivist's framework. He does not propose these criteria as absolutes that must be achieved in all circumstances. Instead, they are considerations for the qualitative researcher.

Coherence

Does the study hang together as a whole? Are the conclusions and comments of the researcher supported by a number of sources? Eisner believes the research project, including the writeup, is an effort to persuade the reader. One aspect of that persuasiveness is whether the data and interpretations make sense as a whole.

Qualitative inquiry . . . is ultimately a matter of persuasion, of seeing things in a new way that satisfies, or is useful for the purposes we embrace. The evidence employed in qualitative studies comes from multiple sources. We are persuaded by its "weight," by the coherence of the same, by the cogency of the interpretation. We try out our perspective and attempt to see if it seems "right" . . . In qualitative research there is no statistical test of significance to determine if results "count"; in the end, what counts is a matter of judgment. (1997, p. 39)

Consensus

A second criterion for appraisal is consensus, "the condition in which investigators or readers of a work concur that the findings and/or interpretations reported by the investigator are consistent with their own experience or with the evidence presented" (Eisner, 1997, p. 56). Consensus overlaps with coherence but extends the concept to consideration of both other researchers and the experiences of other scholars and readers. However, Eisner is quick to point out that consensus does not mean truth. Whole groups of researchers can reach consensus on an issue and then decide later that they were wrong. In the field of chemistry the famous polywater scandal (Franks, 1983) in the 1960s illustrates this point. After Soviet scientists reported the discovery of a "new form" of water that froze at a lower temperature than ordinary water and boiled at a temperature 100 degrees higher than ordinary water, researchers all over the world reported they had duplicated the original research. Many theories were developed to explain polywater, and many centers launched research programs to study

it. However, some labs kept reporting failures to replicate the original research. Eventually, the whole line of research was discredited, and chemists today generally believe there is no such thing as polywater.

Instrumental Utility

For Eisner this is the most important test for a qualitative study. Is it useful? Usefulness can come in several forms. A study may “help us understand a situation that would otherwise be enigmatic or confusing” (1997, p. 58). It may also help us anticipate the way future situations will develop or assist us in understanding our past experiences better. Qualitative research may also serve as maps or “portrayals of terrain. They are designed to enable the traveler to anticipate (and to secure or avoid) particular encounters on the journey” (p. 59). However, Eisner believes qualitative scholarship less often provides a map and more often gives us guides.

Guides, more than maps, are closely associated with the utilities of qualitative studies. Unlike maps, qualitative studies are general, they are not mathematically scaled to match the territory, and they are more interpretive and narrative. . . . Guides call our attention to aspects of the situation or place we might otherwise miss. (p. 59)

Insightfulness

Yes, the list at the beginning of this section said Eisner had three criteria. But he talks fervently about the idea of insight, and it is added to the list. Qualitative research data do not yield easily to automatic or technical analysis. The meaning of the data is not obvious. Eisner (1997) concludes that rationality is needed to get meaning from data.

By rationality I mean the exercise of intelligence in the creation or perception of elements as they relate to the whole in which they participate. I do not restrict rationality to discursively mediated thought or limit it to the application of logic. Human rationality is displayed whenever relationships among elements are skillfully crafted or insightfully perceived. (p. 52)

Insightful research makes us aware of issues and ideas that we could not see for ourselves.

Coherence, consensus, instrumental utility, and insightfulness are not technical standards in the sense of the rules for conducting traditional

experimental research. They are, instead, much more like Eisner's concept of guides.

Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and their meaning for humans. Although the approach has much in common with phenomenology, hermeneutics, critical theory, and feminism, it also has a well-established history of its own (Deledalle, 2001). The framework has two fathers, one American and one European. Ferdinand de Saussure was the Swiss scholar who founded linguistics and semiotics. Saussure's form of semiotics is probably better known in the humanities than in the American social sciences. Saussure also contributed to some of the foundational ideas of another literary movement, deconstruction. At the core of his thinking is the idea that a sign or *signifier* (which is what carries meaning) and the *signified* (the meaning) are not related in any necessary or essential way. Therefore, all language and other forms of signs that carry meaning are arbitrary.

Deconstruction

French poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida developed the idea of deconstruction from the work of Heidegger. Better known as a theory of literary criticism than as a concept in the social sciences, the core of deconstruction is the assertion that texts (which may be books or other documents as well as social and cultural processes such as women's fashion or rules about equal opportunity) can have more than one meaning or *voice*. Deconstruction is the process of uncovering these different voices and making them obvious. And some of the voices uncovered may be the opposite of what the author intended or contradictory to other voices expressed in the same text. Often the contradictions in a text can be traced to the history of the culture in which the text is situated. For example, in a text on the importance of equality in the workplace there may be vestiges of earlier cultural attitudes that reflect racial or gender biases.

The American father of semiotics was Charles Sanders Peirce. He distinguished between three types of signs:

- *Icons*, which derive their meaning from similarities between the sign and that which is signified

- *Indexes*, which have meaning based on cause and effect relationships
- *Symbols*, which have meaning based on agreement or convention

Peirce's system posits meaning that can come from more than the arbitrary associations of Saussure, but the two fathers have both been important influences in the arts. Semiotics has been used as a framework to study how we derive meaning from visual images and other types of signs. The scope of semiotics is broad, as a sampling of the general topics and presentations at the 1996 meeting of the Semiotic Society of America indicates:

William Pencak: Emily Dickinson: Post-Colonial Feminist, Post-Modern Semiotician

Mattie Scott: Sexual Harassment: A Semiotic Perspective

Josephine Carubia: Gender and Geometry in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

Almira Ousmanova: Gender Representation in Soviet Cinema: Fragmented Vision or Fragmented Image?

Nina Corazzo: The Garden Enclosed (*bortus conclusus*) and Its Vegetation as Sign

Linda McDonald: Cultivating the Garden: Growth and Change in Teachers' Practices

Vincent Colapietro: Peircean Reflections on Gendered Subjects

Tom F. N. Puckett: The Advent of Aristotle in the Soul of St. Thomas Aquinas: Rhetorica or Scientia?

John K. Sheriff: Literary Art/Artistic Women: Linking Subjectivity to Social Significance

John Deely: The Four Ages of Understanding Between Ancient Physics and Postmodern Semiotics

Mary C. Miles: From Elf to Pelf: Santa Claus in America

Scott Simpkins: "Role Stress" and Conflicted Masculinities in Byron's *The Corsair*

Karen M. Sheriff: Metonymical Re-membering and Signifyin(g) in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Lauro Zavala: A Semiotics of Film and Literary Fiction: Classic, Modern, and Postmodern

Charles Pearson: Peirce's Theorem: or the Characteristic Theorem of Semiotics

Another indication of the breadth of interests in this field is the statement of purpose of the journal *Semiotica*:

SEMIOTICA, with a strictly scientific orientation, plans to publish studies in all fields in which the notion of signs is or can be recognized and discussed, such as logic, linguistics, information theory, analysis of social relationships, types of discourse (in epistemology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc.), poetics, esthetics in the arts.

We invite contributions from all who are interested in developing semiotic concepts within the lines of the scientific approach we wish to encourage. (*Semiotica*, 1969)

Note that the editors of *Semiotica* indicated they were interested only in "scientific" papers, but their meaning of *scientific* is not the same as that of postpositivists. There is no particular method or form of data analysis that must be used in a semiotic study. This is indicated by the statement of purpose in the *American Journal of Semiotics*:

The Discipline of SEMIOTICS studies signs and sign systems in order to describe, analyze, and interpret the full range of communication and culture experienced as discourse codes, events, messages, practices, and texts expressed and perceived as cultural, social, and natural subjects and objects. There are no subject matter or methodology restrictions in the journal, but all manuscripts are expected to meet a rigorous standard of scholarly research publication together with the particular application of a semiotic theory and method relevant to the author's chosen subject matter. Past issues of the journal may be consulted for examples of subject matters and methodologies ranging over the arts, humanities, and sciences. (*American Journal of Semiotics*, 1998)

Today the semiotics framework is used by scholars in many different fields including anthropology, linguistics, sociology, psychology, and education. The Web site of the Semiotic Society of America (<http://www.uwf.edu/tprewitt/SSA.htm>) is an excellent source of additional information on semiotics. The society sponsors the *American Journal of Semiotics* (<http://www.pdcnet.org/tajs.html>), holds an annual conference, and publishes a newsletter as well as the conference proceedings. There is also an

International Association for Semiotic Studies (<http://www.arthist.lu.se/kultsem/assoc/IASShp1.html>) that publishes the journal *Semiotica* and a series of books on semiotics. An excellent source of general information on semiotics and material specifically related to semiotic analysis of images is the Web site at the University of Newcastle (<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/department/fad/fi/woodrow/semiotic.htm>).

Article of Interest

Peter Teo. (2004). Ideological dissonances in Singapore's national campaign posters: A semiotic deconstruction. *Visual Communications*, 3(2), 189–212.

This study is an example of semiotic research. In this case, it is a semiotic analysis of three campaign posters used by the government of Singapore to promote different cultural practices. One poster encouraged productivity, another promoted the speaking of Mandarin, and the third advocated courtesies. In the article Peter Teo, who teaches at the national Institute of Education in Singapore, introduces and applies the approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen to analyze the three posters. It involves “reading images” along three dimensions of meaning making: the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction.

Teo's method also included a deconstructionist approach, which looks for and makes apparent contradictions in the message of a text. For example, the productivity poster is aimed at all workers, but of the 10 workers represented, only two are female, and both of them are at the bottom of the illustration, “suggesting, perhaps, their lower status relative to that of the males” (p. 199). Although no study can be considered typical semiotic research, Teo's analysis of campaign posters illustrates one application of this framework to visual images.

To read the entire article, please go to http://www.sagepub.com/willis_aoi.

The Phenomenological Psychological Model (and Structuralism)

Across the history of psychology there have been movements that did not accept the positivist and postpositivist approaches to research (Giorgi, 1995). One such movement is phenomenology. It is based on the assumption that the subjects of psychological (and other social science) research

have consciousness just as the researcher does, but that the subjects of natural science research (e.g., stars, rocks, plants, organs) do not. "This fundamental fact is missing in the natural sciences and it is not always appreciated that the concepts, methods and criteria of the natural sciences were introduced and developed in dialogue with phenomena that lacked consciousness" (Giorgi, 1995, p. 25). Phenomenology focuses on this point and is in many ways the study of consciousness.

Phenomenology uses a specialized vocabulary that helps emphasize its interests. To distinguish between real things (noumena) and our perceptions of them (phenomena), phenomenologists talk about the real thing that exists in the world versus our perception. The focus of phenomenology is the perceived thing. Another way they distinguish between external and internal things is through the concept of acts. Phenomenologists distinguish between

acts of consciousness and the objects that are correlated by such acts. However, acts have to be understood in a two-dimensional way in order to be as faithful as possible to the dynamic characteristics of the life of consciousness. The word "act" refers . . . to the fact that by means of consciousness events and objects outside consciousness can be actualized for us. (Giorgi, 1995, p. 29)

Phenomenological psychology focuses on consciousness and perceptions. There is no effort to equate perceptions with external reality. Phenomenologists know that the perception of an external object is necessarily a partial, subjective, and incomplete one; it does not mirror reality. And because perception is different from the external object that is the subject of perception, "another term is needed, other than the thing itself and the series of acts of consciousness, to refer to the specific and precise awareness that one has of the 'real'" (Giorgi, 1995, p. 30) objects.

Phenomenologists use the term "phenomenon" as a general term, to refer to the actual grasp that one has of the real things and events that exist in the world transcendent [the real world]. . . . When one begins to specify "phenomena," one begins to articulate objects such as precepts, memories, images, cognitions, etc. (Giorgi, 1995, p. 30)

The key focus of phenomenological research in its pure form is consciousness. Existentialists, who share a common intellectual heritage, may extend that to human existence, subjectively experienced.

What sorts of research do phenomenologists do? What are their methods? There is generally an emphasis on consciousness, subjective understanding, or psychological understanding.

Basically, the phenomenological psychological method is one of the qualitative research strategies that have been emerging during the last 20 years or so. It is research based upon descriptions of experiences as they occur in everyday life by persons from all walks of life. These descriptions can be written by participants initially or the data could be obtained by means of an interview and then transcribed. The procedures could also be combined by first having the participant write a response to the research question and then have the researcher obtain more data by a follow-up interview based on the initial description provided by the participant. The descriptions are the raw data. These descriptions are then systematically and methodically analysed so that the implicit or explicit psychological meanings contained in them can be identified or made explicit and organized to reveal the underlying psychological structures. (Giorgi, 1995, pp. 39–40)

Interviews and questioning are the primary means of obtaining data. What is the purpose? It is not to find out about an external reality. It is to understand the meaning a conscious person has developed. Furthermore, it is to understand the structure of that consciousness. Giorgi (1995) believed this method is scientific because

the claim can be made that these structures (the underlying psychological structures that are discovered by this type of research) are the result of processes that are systematic, critical, general and methodical and that they are open to intersubjective verification by the community of psychologists. (p. 40)

Intersubjective verification suggests these are universals. You can discover them in one subject and, if they are true, you can then find them in other subjects as well. Even other researchers will be able to find them. This is, of course, a positivist perspective applied to qualitative data. This perspective is not shared by most interpretivists. The search is more for individual and contextualized understanding rather than for universal cognitive structures.

The approach described by Giorgi is part of a larger approach, structuralism, that has a long history in psychology and other social sciences. The

basic goal of structuralism is to identify and map out the topic being studied. Freud's concept of id, ego, and superego is an attempt to map out the unconscious part of the mind. Piaget's stages of cognitive development represent one of many efforts to describe the structure of human development across different periods of life. For more information on phenomenological research methods, see Cohen, Kahn, and Steeves (2000), Heidegger and Dahlstrom (2005), Karlsson (1993), and Kvale (1983). Christine Bruce and Ron Gerber (n.d.) at the University of Queensland in Australia have also produced an interesting annotated bibliography in book form that lists and cross-indexes hundreds of studies from this perspective. Their book is also available on the Internet (<http://sky.fit.qut.edu.au/~bruce/anabib/intro.html>).

Poststructuralism and Postmodernism

Structuralism and the form of phenomenology described by Giorgi have been criticized in recent years for looking at structures—whether they be in society or in the mind—as if they are simply there. Poststructuralists and postmodernists, among others, have argued that what structuralists find are not givens to be accepted as the standard or normal way things are but are instead products of a particular culture, context, and set of experiences. Thus, although these new ways of thinking exist within the broad framework of phenomenology, they tend to reject the structuralist idea that what is being discovered is in any way universal or common across individuals or groups. This shift in viewpoint is the source of much of the tumult in the social sciences today.

The postmodern turn in ethnography, and in the social sciences more generally, has inspired commentators to identify and to explore a range of ways to report and represent the social or the cultural. In recent years there has emerged a dual process of destabilization: taken-for-granted categories and methods of data collection have become problematic; so have taken-for-granted methods of representing the outcomes of social research. . . .

The once stable category of ethnography, a well-established approach to social research in anthropology and some schools of sociology (such as symbolic interactionism), has recently undergone a process of fragmentation. Centrifugal forces have given rise to a multiplicity of standpoints. One can now identify an almost carnivalesque variety of approaches, sometimes inspired by a departure from former analytic traditions. While the sources of that

polymorphous diversity should not be reduced to a simple list of “issues,” one can recognize the interplay of poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminism and postcolonialism. Throughout those various standpoints runs a discursive turn, treating as central but problematic the relations of language, knowledge and power. Many of these perspectives indeed give rise to analyses that render ethnography itself, at least in any conventional mode, highly problematic, if not all-but-impossible. (Coffey, Holbrook, & Atkinson, 1996)¹

Denzin (1994) expressed a similar viewpoint when he discussed the challenges of feminism and poststructuralism to another framework, symbolic interactionism. Denzin believes that traditional

interactionists have persisted in believing in the presence of a concrete real subject. . . . Language (and the verbal reports it permits) has been taken as the window into the inner life of the person. A behaviouristic theory of the sign, symbol and language, unresponsive to Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic of the sign, has given interactionists a weak theory of the symbolic. (p. 50)

Symbolic interactionism will be discussed later, but the point to be made here is that the rise of interpretive and critical foundations for qualitative research brings into question some of the assumptions about what we can know from research. Can psychologists plot the structure of the human mind by studying a few humans and then generalizing to all? Can sociologists study patterns of relationships between men and women and then propose universal patterns? Can educational technologists study the success or failure of a few distance education programs, or multimedia simulations, and then propose universal conclusions? In general, the new theories shout “No.” They argue that you can use the methods of approaches such as structuralism and phenomenology, but you cannot accept the idea that the methods will lead you to bedrock truth. Feminists, for example, have argued for years that how women and men relate is not innate but socially and culturally conditioned in many complex ways. And there will be multiple perspectives on that complexity. The age of universal truths is over. As Coffey et al. (1996) put it,

It is not necessary to endorse all the criticisms of postmodernists, feminists and postcolonialist critics in order to recognize the value of research and representations that allow for a plurality of analyses

and interpretations. Likewise, it is not necessary to subscribe to the most extreme versions of textualism in ethnography to recognize that there is room for representations that are more open and more complex than are conventional ethnographic texts. We do not fall into the trap of thinking that hypertext is the embodiment of post-modernism, nor that it solves all the problems posed by critics of conventional ethnographic epistemology. We do, however, believe that the tasks of cultural exploration and representation will be invigorated by the systematic exploitation of such approaches. Indeed, we believe that in the near future, when virtual reality systems, global information links and the like will be commonplace, the traditional ethnographer, reliant on written texts for the primary means of representation and grounded in realist prose, could well seem like a dreadful anachronism.¹

Article of Interest

Megan Blumenreich. (2004). Avoiding the pitfalls of “conventional” narrative research: Using poststructural theory to guide the creation of narratives of children with HIV. *Qualitative Research*, 4(1), 77–90.

Traditional narrative research involves telling a story. Whether you do it right depends on how close you get to the truth about that story. This simple, and perhaps comfortable, way of thinking about narrative research—telling stories—has been replaced by more skeptical and more subjective views of what it means to do good narrative research. Blumenreich, who teaches at City College of New York, traces the development of some of the more problematic interpretations of what narrative is, and she suggests using poststructuralist theory as a framework for modifying traditional narrative methods. She illustrates how this can be accomplished through a discussion of her narrative research work with children with HIV. As you read her discussion of Joseph’s talks with her, note that she attempts to let Joseph establish meaning for the reader rather than imposing (or structuring) the meaning herself and imposing it on Joseph’s narrative. Do you think she was successful? Or is it impossible to keep your own ideas and context out of a story you are telling?

To read the entire article, please go to http://www.sagepub.com/willis_aoi.

Symbolic Interactionism

Denzin (1995, p. 43) lists seven root assumptions of symbolic interactionism:

- “Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.”
- “The meanings of things arise out of the process of social interaction.”
- “Meanings are modified through an interpretive process, which involves self-reflective individuals symbolically interacting with one another.”
- “Human beings create the worlds of experience in which they live.”
- “The meanings of these worlds come from interaction, and they are shaped by the self-reflections persons bring to their situations.”
- “Such self-interaction is ‘interwoven with social interaction and influences that social interaction’ (Blumer, 1981, p. 153). This means that symbolic interaction (the merger of self and social interaction) is the chief means ‘by which human beings are able to form social or joint acts’ (Blumer, 1981, p. 153).”
- “Joint acts, their formation, dissolution, conflict and merger, constitute what Blumer calls ‘the social life of a human society.’ A society consists of joint or social acts ‘which are formed and carried out by the members’ (Blumer, 1981, p. 153).”

This framework for qualitative research, and precursors of it, was a popular approach in sociology for much of the 20th century. At times the term has even been used in ways that suggest all qualitative research is based on symbolic interaction theory. That may not be too much of an overstatement, however, because the approach is very broad and has demonstrated facility for evolution. It has much in common with phenomenology and also shares the criticisms made against phenomenology (Denzin, 1994). As in phenomenology, a core of symbolic interactionism is subjective meaning. Symbolic interactionists emphasize that the study of humans is not the study of “real” or concrete events in the external world. In fact, on the Web site of the Society for Study of Symbolic Interactionism the message that crawls across one of the animated panels is “Things are not as they seem.” Symbolic interaction research studies human interaction and emphasizes the need to keep in mind that human interaction is not based solely on the way the external world “really” is. That interaction is based, instead, on how humans interpret their world. It is thus symbolic meaning rather than concrete meaning that is most important in symbolic interaction studies. However, that meaning is not individualistic:

Symbolic Interaction Theory is a loose set of assumptions about how symbols are used to create a shared frame of meaning which, in turn, is used to organize and to interpret human behavior in loose and ever changing patterns of work, commerce, family, worship and play. This process, symbolic interaction, is the solid empirical basis for a social magic in which that which does not exist and which has no causal precursors, does in fact come into actuality. It is a remarkable and wonderful process yet it happens everywhere two or more human beings define a situation, reify it by means of belief, organize their behavior as if such a social event were real and, in the consequence, create a fractal, intersubjective social fact. (Young, 1991)

Even with the emphasis on subjective meaning and human interaction, the range of appropriate topics is still broad. There are studies in this tradition on a wide range of topics in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and education. However, additional tenets of symbolic interaction theory address questions such as the purpose of research and the questions that are worth asking. Denzin (1994, p. 44) discusses seven epistemological characteristics of symbolic interaction theory:

- *General theories are not useful.* “They do not write grand or global theories of societies or the individual. They see society, like interaction, as an emergent phenomenon, a framework for the construction of diverse forms of social action. Interactionists, accordingly, study how people produce their situated versions of society.”
- *Local understanding is important.* “Rejecting totalizing, grand theories of the social, interactionists, like many poststructural (Foucault) and postmodern (Lyotard) theorists, believe in writing local narratives about how people do things together. These narratives take the form of small-scale ethnographics, life stories, in-depth interviews, laboratory studies, historical analyses and textual readings of bits and pieces of popular culture as given in films, novels and popular music.”
- *Objectivity and quantification are not desirable.* “Interactionists do not like theories that objectify and quantify human experience. They prefer, instead, to write texts which remain close to the actual experiences of the people they are writing about. They like texts which express an immediacy of experience, unmediated by the social scientist’s interpretations. This means that interactionist narratives often convey pathos, sentimentalism and a romantic identification with the persons being written about.

Interactionists often study the deviant, stigmatized, lonely, unhappy, alienated and powerless people in everyday life.”

- *Imported theories from the natural sciences are not desirable.* “Aligning themselves more with the humanities than the natural sciences, interactionists approach their materials from a narrative, textual position, understanding that their texts create the subject matter they write about.”

- *Abistorical theories are inadequate.* “Interactionists do not like theories which ignore history, but they are not historical determinists.”

- *Theories that ignore individuals miss much.* “Interactionists do not like theories which ignore the biographies and lived experiences of interacting individuals. They believe that the biographies of individuals articulate specific historical moments. Each individual is a universal singular, . . . expressing in his or her lifetime the general and specific features of a historical epoch. Hence, interactionists don’t like sociologies and psychologies which ignore the stories people tell one another about their life experiences.”

- *Ask “how” questions, not “why” questions.* “Interactionists don’t believe in asking ‘why’ questions. They ask, instead, ‘how’ questions. How, for example, is a given strip of experience structured, lived and given meaning?”

Denzin (1994) points out that the likes and dislikes of interactionists mean “they are often criticized for not doing what other people think they should do, like doing macro-studies of power structures, or not having clearly defined concepts and terms, or being overly cognitive, or having emergent theories, or being ahistorical and astructural” (p. 46).

The foundations of symbolic interaction theory are essentially the same as the paradigm we call interpretivism. In many cases, the decision to call something an example of interpretivism or interactionism depends more on which term is most comfortable for the audience than on any real difference between interpretive and interactionist research paradigms. *Interpretivism* is a broader term, but most, if not all, research in the symbolic interaction tradition would also be interpretive research.

As in interpretivism, the research methods used by interactionists vary widely. This type of research is also reported in a number of ways, from traditional studies to poetry.

Symbolic interaction remains a significant influence on qualitative research. The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (<http://www.sociology.niu.edu>) holds annual meetings, publishes a journal (*Symbolic Interaction*), and hosts an active Web site with numerous links to other

relevant sites and a discussion list. (Another journal in this field, published annually, is *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*.)

In response to criticisms that symbolic interaction research has traditionally supported the status quo, some researchers describe themselves as critical symbolic interactionists or feminist symbolic interactionists to indicate that although they use the methods of symbolic interaction, they have also adopted an ideological perspective that opposes the status quo. There are also some variations based on a rejection of linear models of interaction and the adoption of chaos theory as a framework for thinking about symbolic interaction (Young, 1991). Symbolic interaction, more than most of the frameworks discussed in this chapter, appears to be so flexible and elastic that it can respond easily to new perspectives and influences by incorporating them into symbolic interaction rather than rejecting or isolating them.

Articles of Interest

Nick Crossley. (2004). The circuit trainer's habitus: Reflexive body techniques and the sociality of the workout. *Body & Society*, 10(1), 37–69.

Scott Harris. (2003). Studying equality/inequality: Naturalist and constructionist approaches to equality in marriage. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 32(2), 200–232.

These two articles combine a basic symbolic interaction approach with other methods and frameworks to study everyday events. In Crossley's study the focus is on weekly training classes at a private health and fitness club. One of his concerns is about understanding the class as a social process, and he uses Wittgenstein's concept of language games to frame his exploration of the workout classes. There are many rules and norms for "playing the game" that newcomers to the class must learn.

The second article is about ways of studying equality and inequality. The article is based on the dissertation of the author, Scott Harris, at the University of Oregon. Harris compares two approaches, naturalist and constructionist (which are roughly equivalent to postpositivist and interpretive approaches), and he proposes that the most suitable approach is constructionist. Harris's article includes a detailed overview of the research process, including data collection and analysis, from both postpositivist and constructionist perspectives. Note the differences in the data collection (e.g., interviewing) and data analysis techniques.

As you read these two articles, keep the characteristics of symbolic interaction research in mind. Is there a family resemblance between these studies and the characteristics? Do the studies go beyond those characteristics? Does any aspect of either study contradict the basic guidelines for symbolic interaction research?

To read these articles in their entirety, please go to http://www.sagepub.com/willis_aoi.

Summary

Qualitative research is an approach to understanding human and social behavior that emphasizes the collection of “thick” data. Contemporary qualitative research is the result of more than a hundred years of development, and that history is an important part of the context in which qualitative research is conducted. Qualitative research is also influenced by philosophies of social science (e.g., paradigms) such as critical theory and interpretivism. However, paradigms are general guides. More specific are frameworks such as analytic realism, Eisner’s connoisseurship model, semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, and analytic induction. All these frameworks are options for a qualitative researcher, and they point toward certain research methods, goals, and topics. Two characteristics—the search for contextual understanding instead of universal laws and a design-as-you-go or emergent approach—help distinguish interpretive, and to some extent critical, approaches to qualitative research from postpositivist quantitative research.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do you think there are any universal laws of human behavior that can be relied on across eras, situations, cultures, and contexts? If there are, do you believe we can discover them through research? How does your view of this issue compare with that of the postpositivists and the interpretivists? Why do you think you take the position you do on this question?
2. The design-as-you-go approach is much more flexible than a technical rational approach to research that requires all the methods to be prescribed beforehand. However, postpositivist researchers would point out that it leaves you open to charges that you may bias your data and thus your conclusions and make it very difficult for someone else to replicate your study. Do you agree with these criticisms? How would you explain your position to someone who is more comfortable with the other approach?
3. Consider each of the frameworks discussed in this chapter. Which one seems most problematic to you? Why? Which one do you find most appealing? Why?
4. Consider a field of research that interests you. Do you think a research career in that field would be most successful if the researcher concentrated on one of the frameworks presented in

this chapter? Which one? Why? Or do you think the researcher would make more progress using different frameworks for different studies in that field? Why?

Note

1. From Coffey, A., B. Holbrook and P. Atkinson, *Qualitative Data Analysis: Technologies and Representations*, in *Sociological Research Online*, 1(1). Copyright © 1996 by Sage Publications, Ltd.

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