

Hi everyone, Dr. Pope here. This screencast will introduce you to qualitative research methods.

**By the end of this screencast you will:

- Know a bit about the history of qualitative research in academia
- Be familiar with the meaning of the term “naturalistic inquiry”
- Determine major differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches to research.

Qualitative Research in Academia

**Qualitative research began first in the fields of anthropology and sociology – where researchers attempt to understand the ins and outs of culture and intricacies of people’s lives. Think about anthropologists in the 1970s going and doing fieldwork in remote areas of other countries attempting to learn about the cultures of various peoples. They used qualitative methods to gather data and write detailed, descriptive reports about these peoples. Now, methods like these are used in a wide variety of disciplines where researchers attempt to understand various phenomena in a holistic way.

**While this is not as prevalent as it was decades ago, qualitative researchers in the social sciences (and other fields) have been met with scorn, confusion, and possibly condescension regarding the quality and rigor of qualitative methodologies as opposed to quantitative methodologies. While I believe this stems from misunderstands and misconceptions of the quality, rigor, and merit of qualitative methods, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) explained that:

**The challenges to qualitative research are many. Qualitative researchers are called journalists, or soft scientists. Their work is termed unscientific, or only exploratory, or subjective. It is called criticism and not theory, or it is interpreted politically, as a disguised version of Marxism or secular humanism. These resistances reflect an uneasy awareness that the traditions of qualitative research commit the researcher to a critique of the positivist or postpositivist project... The experimental (positivist) sciences (physics, chemistry economics, and psychology, for example) are often seen as the crowning achievement of Western civilization, and in their practices it is assumed that “truth” can transcend opinion and personal bias. Qualitative research is seen as an assault on this tradition, whose adherents often retreat into a “value-free objectivist science” model to defend their position. (pp. 7-8)

**However the benefits of qualitative research methodologies transcend this bias. Qualitative research offers a view to a phenomenon or research problem unattainable by positivist, quantitative methods. The word qualitative “implies an emphasis on the qualities of entities and on the process and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured (if measured at all) in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (p. 8). In contrast to quantitative methodologies, qualitative researchers “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning,” answers that are not available through quantitative methodologies (p. 8).

Naturalistic Inquiry

****Qualitative research is also called naturalistic inquiry (i.e. research in the natural world). Qualitative researchers do not attempt to conduct research from an objectivist standpoint. This means that qualitative research uses “interpretive, naturalistic methods” to collect data. Qualitative researchers approach research and data collection with the assumption that in order to understand human experience and the natural world, we must include human understandings and experiences within our data, and these are typically more subjective than objective in nature. As explained by Erlandson et al. (1993), “The naturalistic paradigm, valuing as it does the separate realities that have been created by individuals, must also value the way these realities are responded to and the ways in which they enable individuals to respond productively to their environments” (p. 132). In other words, data collection in qualitative research works within natural settings and uses methods that intend to capture the participants’ own understandings of their experiences.**

****Qualitative research is complex, dynamic, and interdisciplinary in nature. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) support this intricacy in their definition of qualitative research: activities that place the researcher within the world they observe and “consist of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible... [Q]ualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).**

****To try to understand a specific phenomenon, qualitative researchers use a variety of methods to generate data. These methods collect data focused on human experience and the meanings individual create from those experience. A qualitative researcher stresses “the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). Common qualitative data generation methods include interviews, focus groups, observations, and the collection of documents and/or artifacts.**

Qualitative Research & Methodological Paradigms

****In order to conduct qualitative research, a paradigm shift is necessary. Researchers cannot approach qualitative research from a quantitative standpoint (just like researchers cannot approach quantitative research from a qualitative standpoint). For instance, instead of describing variables in qual we work to understand phenomena. We don't "measure" something or use "instrumentation" in our research. In terms of reliability and validity, we typically don't use these terms but strive to ensure quality and rigor of research through the establishment of trustworthiness.**

****This paradigm shift begins at the way individuals approach research. Behind every research study is an assumption about the nature of reality. The term for the nature of reality is “ontology.” The dictionary definition of the term ontology is: “a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature and relations of being; a particular theory about the nature of being or the kinds of things that have existence.” (Merriam-Webster). Your understanding of the nature of reality is an underlying concept of any research project.**

****The various ways researchers understand reality have been organized into methodological paradigms. Important concepts within these paradigms are ontology (answering the question: what is the nature of reality?), epistemology (answering the questions: what is valid knowledge within reality and how do we obtain knowledge? And what is the relationship between knowledge and the knower?); and methodology (answering the question: how do we gather knowledge about the world?). These questions all have answers to them within and outside the context of research. So, we are all philosophers in a sense. Think about these questions, you probably already have answers for them. Maybe your answers come from what you know about education, religion, and/or other aspects of your personal worldview. So, think of a paradigm as a net of sorts that includes ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The dictionary defines paradigm as a “cognitive framework.” Each paradigm followed in research has its own assumptions about ontology and epistemology and the methodologies that relate.**

****While quantitative research follows an objectivist paradigm, qualitative research often follows paradigms more interpretive in nature. Such paradigms ask the researcher to make use of the assumptions and interpretations they themselves bring to any research project. Additionally, which methodological paradigm you follow will determine the theoretical framework of any study you design.**

****According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), there are four major paradigms within qualitative research: the positivist & postpositivist, the constructivist-interpretive, the critical, and the feminist-poststructural. Each of these paradigms follow assumptions outlined in relativist ontologies (the belief in the existence of multiple realities constructed from the understandings of individual people), and interpretive epistemologies (the belief that there is an interaction between individuals and what is known about the world and that these interactions shape our understandings of the world).**

Qualitative Vs. Quantitative Research

****Methodologically, qualitative research contrasts quantitative research in five important ways:**

- 1. **Uses of positivism and postpositivism: Some qualitative researchers do work within a positivist paradigm; however while they use similar “statistical measures, methods, and documents as a way of locating groups of subjects within larger populations, they will seldom report their findings in terms of the kinds of complex statistical measures or methods to which quantitative researchers are drawn” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 9).**
- 2. **Acceptance of postmodern sensibilities: Qualitative researchers see positivist methods as one of many ways to understand aspects of society or the social world; “they are no better or worse than other methods, they just tell different kinds of stories” (p. 10).**
- 3. **Capturing the individual’s point of view: qualitative researchers argue that research methods such as interviewing and observation allow for a closer examination of individual points of view regarding a particular experience. To them, “quantitative researchers are seldom able to capture their subjects’ perspectives because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials” (p. 10).**
- 4. **Examining the constraints of everyday life: “Qualitative researchers are more likely to confront and come up against the constraints of the everyday social world. They see this**

world in action and embed their findings in it. Quantitative researchers abstract from the world and seldom study it directly” (p. 10).

5. ****Securing rich descriptions:** “Qualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable, whereas quantitative researchers... are less concerned with such detail. Quantitative researchers are deliberately unconcerned with rich descriptions because such detail interrupts the process of developing generalizations” (p. 10).

Methodologies & Methods in Qualitative Research

****There are a wide variety of methodologies (the overall design or plan for a study) in qualitative research. But, there are some that are more common than others. Five common methodologies in qualitative research are basic/descriptive research, narrative research, case study research, ethnographic research, and grounded theory research.**

****Within each of these methodologies are methods that educational researchers use to collect data. Three of the most common are interviews, observations, and the use of documents.**

****For interviews, researchers will typically create an interview guide, audio record the interview, transcribe the interview, then analyze the transcription.**

****During an observation, researchers typically take field notes and write reflective memos on what they’ve seen and heard. These two texts are the primary forms of data for this method.**

****Finally, researchers will use documents and artifacts as data. This can include text documents, electronic documents, or artifacts like images and clothing. As a side note, audiovisual materials are a data source growing in qualitative research.**

Interested in Qualitative Research?

****As you learn more about how to conduct qualitative research, remember the necessary paradigm shift away from quantitative conceptions of what makes good research.**

****Look at the different terminology that is used, it’ll differ from that which is used in quantitative research.**

****I was trained to say data generation rather than data collection for qualitative research, because the term collection implies an objective existence of data that the researcher collects whereas the term generation recognizes the fact that the researcher’s methods and behavior are integral to the nature and quality of the data gathered.**

Personally, I find qualitative research intriguing, fun, and stimulating due to the interactions between the researcher and participants as well as working through the types of data generated for qualitative studies. Qualitative research as much to offer educational research!