





# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Guide to Design and  
Implementation

Revised and Expanded  
from *Qualitative  
Research and Case Study  
Applications in Education*

Sharan B. Merriam

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# PREFACE

Within the last twenty years qualitative research has become a mature field of study with its own literature base, research journals, special interest groups, and regularly scheduled conferences. What has remained constant amidst the burgeoning of resources for doing qualitative research is the value of a practical guide for designing and implementing this type of research. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* represents my effort to explain qualitative research in an easy-to-follow narrative accessible to both novice and experienced researchers. In essence, it is a practical guide without being just a “cookbook” for conducting qualitative research; readers also come to understand the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this research paradigm.

*Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* represents the latest iteration in my thinking and understanding of qualitative research. The first edition, published in 1988, centered on qualitative *case study* research; the 1998 second edition featured *qualitative research*, with case study as a secondary focus. For this third edition I have again reduced the attention to qualitative case studies. This is because people who have used both the first and second editions of this book have told me that they are using the book as a guide to qualitative research generally, and only secondarily as a book about conducting qualitative case studies. However, because case studies are a popular form of qualitative research and because what constitutes a qualitative case study is often confused with other approaches, I have devoted a chapter to qualitative case studies as one type of qualitative research. I have also addressed sample selection in a case study and writing up the findings in a case study as part of the chapters on these topics (Chapters Four and Ten).

There are two substantive changes from the previous edition. First, I have included a chapter titled “Types of Qualitative Research” (Chapter Two) in which I explain the nature of and differences among six common types of qualitative research—basic qualitative study, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and critical qualitative research. Although these topics were covered briefly in the previous edition, from my experiences teaching and conducting workshops, there is little clarity about the differences among these approaches for researchers new to qualitative research—hence, a chapter devoted to differentiating among these common types. The other change has to do with positioning this book in applied fields of practice, not just education. Again, I have had people in my workshops from nursing, social work, management, allied health, administration, counseling, religion, management, gerontology, and human resource development among others, as well as every subfield of education. Although my field of practice is adult education and therefore there are more examples from education and adult education than other areas, I have made an effort to bring in examples from a variety of fields of practice. Certainly the design and implementation of a qualitative study is the same across these fields.

Another defining characteristic of this book is its how-to, practical focus, wherein the mechanics of conducting a qualitative study are presented in a simple, straightforward manner. Designing a qualitative study, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the research report are topics logically presented and liberally illustrated to assist the researcher desiring some guidance in the process. The revisions in these chapters have greatly benefited from my having access to a decade of additional resources published since the second edition, my own research, my supervision of dozens of qualitative dissertations, and in particular, my conducting certificate programs in qualitative research methods in South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea. From these hands-on workshops, I have myself learned techniques and strategies for assisting learners in understanding qualitative research. Thus I draw upon recent literature in the field as well as my own experiences with qualitative research for this third edition. The intended audiences for this book, then, are practitioners and

graduate students in applied fields of practice who are interested in understanding, designing, and conducting a qualitative study.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

The organization of this text reflects the process of conducting a qualitative research investigation. Part One contains four chapters. The first is on the nature of qualitative research, the second covers different types of qualitative research, the third chapter focuses on case study as one common type of qualitative research, and the fourth explains the procedure for setting up a qualitative study, including selecting a sample. Part Two consists of three chapters that detail data collection techniques. The three chapters in Part Three deal with analyzing the data collected, handling concerns about reliability, validity, and ethics, and writing the final report. I have also included in an appendix a qualitative methodology template I created for graduate students who are designing a qualitative thesis or dissertation.

Chapter One positions qualitative research within research in general, discusses the roots of qualitative research in sociology and anthropology, and briefly describes early contributions in the development of qualitative research as a field itself. Next, the chapter reviews the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research as it contrasts with positivist (or quantitative), critical, and postmodern research traditions. Drawing from its philosophical foundations, the chapter presents a definition and characteristics of qualitative research. It closes with a discussion of the investigator characteristics and skills needed to conduct a qualitative study.

Writers have organized the variety of types of qualitative studies into various traditions or approaches. Chapter Two reviews six of the more common types of qualitative studies found across applied fields of practice. The first “type” discussed is what I call a “basic” qualitative research study. This is by far the most common type of qualitative study found in education and most likely in other fields of practice; other texts on qualitative research seem to assume everyone knows this is the case and go on to talk about other types. Other types of qualitative research share all the characteristics of a basic qualitative study but have an additional

dimension. Other types and their unique characteristics discussed in this chapter are phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and critical qualitative research.

*Case study* is a term used by many people in many different ways to mean many different things. The purpose of Chapter Three is to define and further differentiate case study from other qualitative approaches to a research problem. A qualitative case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit. Chapter Three explains the special features of qualitative case studies, describes types of case studies, and reviews the strengths and limitations of qualitative case studies.

Knowledge of previous research and theory can help a researcher focus on the problem of interest and select the unit of analysis most relevant to the problem. Chapter Four explains what a theoretical framework is and shows how reviewing relevant literature can contribute not only to identifying the study's theoretical framework but also to shaping the problem statement. The problem statement lays out the logic and purpose of the study and is critical to making informed decisions regarding sample selection (also covered in this chapter), data collection, and data analysis. Chapter Four also discusses sample selection in case study research.

Data collection techniques are covered in the three chapters in Part Two. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven examine the three primary means of collecting data in qualitative research. Interviews, discussed in Chapter Five, can range in structure from a list of predetermined questions to a totally free-ranging interview in which nothing is set ahead of time. The success of an interview depends on the nature of the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent and on the interviewer's skill in asking good questions. Chapter Five also covers how to record and evaluate interview data.

Observations differ from interviews in that the researcher obtains a first-hand account of the phenomenon of interest rather than relying on someone else's interpretation. Chapter Six discusses what to observe, the interdependent relationship between observer and observed, and how to record observations

in the form of field notes. Chapter Seven presents the third primary source of qualitative data: documents. The term *document* is broadly defined to cover an assortment of written records, physical traces, visual data, and artifacts. Although some documents might be developed at the investigator's request, most are produced independently of the research study and thus offer a valuable resource for confirming insights gained through interviews and observations. Chapter Seven covers various types of documents, their use in qualitative research, and their strengths and limitations as sources of data.

Many general texts on qualitative research devote more space to theoretical discussions of methodology and data collection than to the actual management and analysis of data once they have been collected. However, I have discovered in my thirty years of experience teaching and conducting qualitative research that the most difficult part of the entire process is *analyzing* qualitative data. I have also come to firmly believe that to learn how to do analysis, there is no substitute for actually engaging in analysis, preferably with one's own data. Nevertheless, in Chapter Eight I have tried to present as clear a discussion as possible on how to analyze qualitative data. The importance of analyzing data while they are being collected is underscored; some suggestions for analysis early in the study during data collection are also included. Management of the voluminous data typical of a qualitative study is another topic addressed in this chapter. The heart of the chapter presents an inductive analysis strategy for constructing categories or themes that become the findings of the study. The chapter includes a short section on within-case and cross-case analysis common to case studies, followed by discussion of the role of computer software programs in qualitative data analysis. The final section of this chapter reviews data analysis strategies particular to the types of qualitative research discussed in Chapter Two (e.g., phenomenology and narrative analysis).

All researchers are concerned with producing valid and reliable findings. Chapter Nine explores the issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. In particular, internal validity, reliability, and external validity are discussed, and strategies are offered for dealing with each of these issues. Also of concern to researchers is how to conduct an investigation in an ethical manner. Chapter

Nine closes with a section on ethics, paying particular attention to ethical dilemmas likely to arise in qualitative research.

Many an educator has been able to conceptualize a study, collect relevant data, and even analyze the data, but then has failed to carry through in the important last step—writing up the results. Without this step, the research has little chance of advancing the knowledge base of the field or having an impact on practice. Chapter Ten is designed to help qualitative researchers complete the research process by writing a report of their investigation. The first half of the chapter offers suggestions for organizing the writing process—determining the audience for the report, settling on the main message, and outlining the overall report. The rest of the chapter focuses on the content of the report—its components and where to place them, how to achieve a good balance between description and analysis, and how to disseminate the study’s findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of special considerations in writing a case study report.

Finally, the Appendix presents a template I have created for graduate students and others who would like some guidance in what goes into a methodology chapter or proposal of a qualitative research study. This template is an outline of the component parts of a methodology chapter, explaining what needs to be included under each section. A modification of this outline could also be used for the methodology section of a qualitative research grant proposal.

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students who, although they may have taken a number of courses in qualitative research, challenged me to improve my mentoring and advising as they worked through the process. I have, in fact, drawn examples from a number of their dissertations to illustrate aspects of the process. Thanks also go to department staff, and to SeonJoo Kim, a doctoral student here in the Adult Education program, for their assistance with a wide range of technical and organizational tasks related to getting the manuscript ready for publication.

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