

# Qualitative Methods in Doctoral Research

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# Outline

- Philosophy and rationale of qualitative research
- Phases in the design of a Qualitative
- Format of a Qualitative Study

# Philosophy and Rationale

- Quite young (about ....
- Its main precept: reality cannot be objectively observed/perceived from outside but subjectively from within through the direct experience of the observer/perceiver.  
Therefore, reality is understood and explained through the eyes of different participants.

# Philosophy and Rationale

- The world can not be reduced to numbers
- Anti-positivism (developed as a reaction to positivism)
  - constructivism: ability to construct meaning
- Deals with reading between the lines of a phenomena, making sense of reality.
- NB. Main influence: Hermeneutics and phenomenology

# Hermeneutics

The study of meaning and interpretation of texts basing on historical contexts. [emphasis is on linguistic actions]

- Wilhelm Dilthey: text interpreters use their mental power to 'understand' the meaning of a text, and their social-historical knowledge to 'interpret' the text in relation to its author's social-historical context.

**Research implication:** People's opinions, or any linguistic actions cannot be appreciated in isolation of their background/past. Ones background shapes their attitude, set of beliefs, and value system.

# Phenomenology

Reality is viewed and interpreted by various people and according to his/her subjective view. Therefore there is multiple interpretations of an incident. [emphasis is on any social reality]

- Edmund Husserl: the way in which we direct ourselves toward and perceive those objects is normally the "natural standpoint", which is characterized by a belief that objects exist distinct from the perceiving subject and exhibit properties that we see as emanating from them.

**Research implication:** the person's view of reality is unique and subjective. It cannot be by proxy. A researcher can't perceive reality on the participant's behalf. It is the participant's right to hold their subjective perception.

# Other interpretivist philosophies

- **Symbolic interaction - Herbert Blumer:** Humans act towards things (including other individuals) on the basis of the meanings they have for them.
- The meaning or value of an object to one person may differ with another person. The meaning of things arises out of the social interactions one has with one's fellows. The meaning of something is a social product, therefore it is not inherent in things.
- **Research implication:** A researcher should not reduce human action to social rules and norms. Social reality only exists in the context of the human experience. A person has power to ascribe meaning according to their contextual experience.

# Ethnomethodology – Harold Garfinkel

- Garfinkel created the term "ethnomethodology" to describe how people use different methods in order to understand the society they live in. The methods are much fixed in people's natural attitudes.
- Action is made meaningful in the light of the very situation within which it is produced.

**Research implication:** the person's attitude towards anything is determined by the nature of the context in which one is positioned. Therefore, one's conduct should be understood in relation to the existing context.



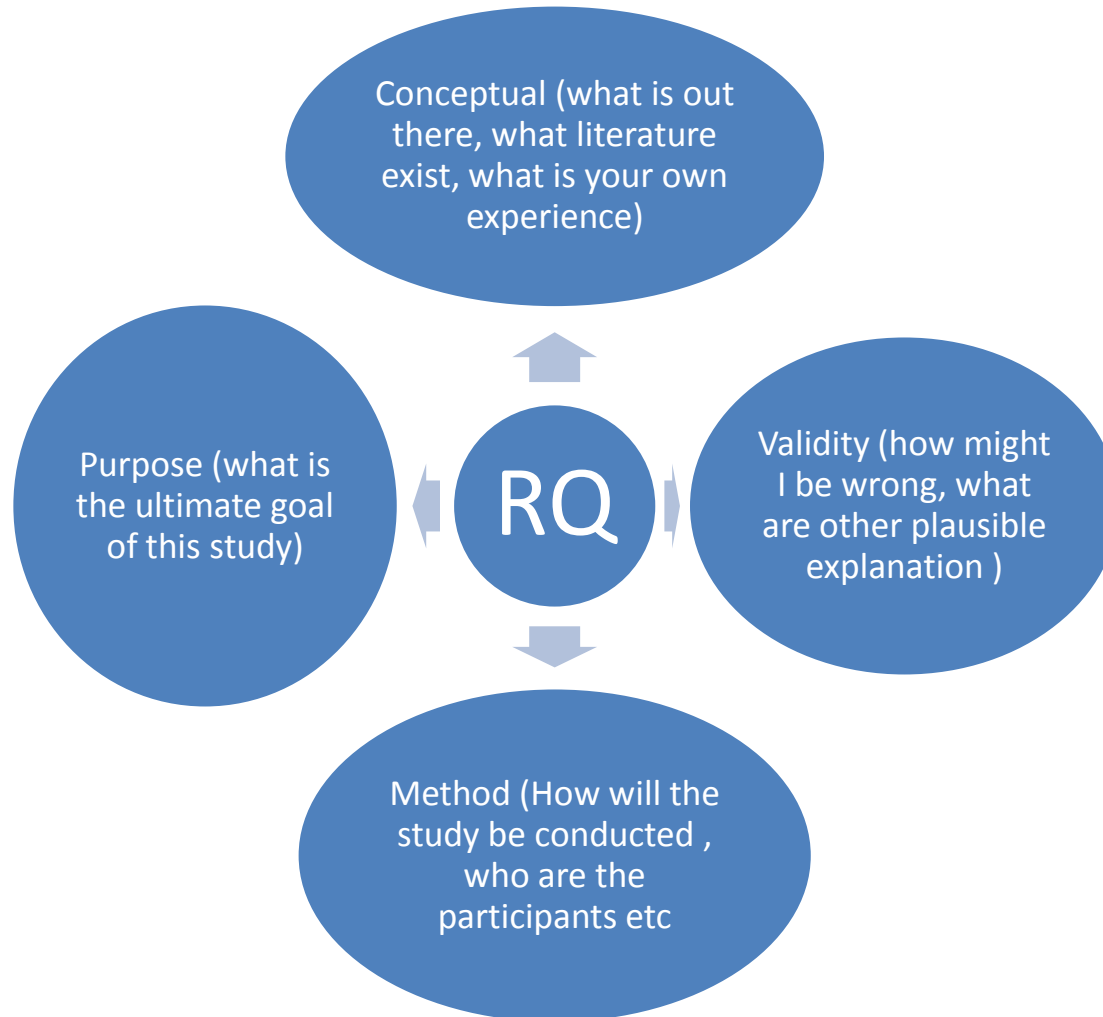
Pause

Questions

# Phases in the design of a Qualitative

- Research idea: Begin with an idea rather than a topic. This will make it possible to continue adjusting the topic around the same area.
- Research design: Underlying theme governing the functioning of the study

# Research Design



# Research Designs – Qualitative study

- Case study: detail examination of a phenomenon (involves in-depth study, data collected over an extended period, uses several methods)
- Historical studies: systematic, objective location, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts; an act of reconstruction, uses many methods)

# Research Designs – Qualitative study

- Action Research: research in action rather than research about action.
  - Based on the argument that research that leads only in books is inadequate, research should lead to change
  - Research is collaborative – involves practitioners
  - Uses feedback from data in an on going cyclical process

# Research Designs – Qualitative study

- Ethnography: attempt to grasp the native's point of view, their relation to life and to realise their vision of their world' (Malinowski 1922)
  - Involves an extended period in the field (immersion in order to make sense of the phenomenon), uses many methods but observation is key.

# Qualitative research methods

- 1. Participant observation:** researcher becomes active participant, requires extended period in the field in order to gain acceptance and be able to observe the natural phenomenon
- 2. Non Participant observation:** researcher remains as discreet as possible, does not take as long as participant observation

# Qualitative research methods

3. **Unstructured interviews:** Although the researcher may have some initial guiding questions or core concepts to ask about, there is no formal structured instrument or protocol.
- The interviewer is free to move the conversation in any direction of interest that may come up.
  - By prompts the researcher can obtain a lot of information from the interviewee



# Qualitative research methods

- 4. Document Analysis:** Documents could be primary or secondary.
- Primary sources are produced by those directly involved in or witnesses to a particular episode or issue. They provide the researcher with first hand accounts.
  - Secondary sources are written after the event, usually by those who were not party to it.
- 5. FGD-** relies on interaction within the group
- 6. Open ended questionnaires**

# Data Analysis

- Significantly facilitated by good management and organisation of the data during the research process.
  - Careful planning important e.g. obtaining confidence, opening comments, dressing, location of the interviews, level of knowledge of the interviewees in the area – provide theme early, researcher own knowledge, have I understood the interviewees well – test for understanding)
  - Audio record, take notes, read through transcript daily, write memos, note unclear issues for further probe

# Data Analysis

- Final analysis – coding (search for key words and phrases, pull out chunks of text that relate to a particular concept, detect patterns, categorise, ascribe generic concepts to the categories - which explain or clarify the research question.
- Computer software available (Ethnograph, Textbase, Alpha, Nvivo, and Nud.Ist), but it is important to know what qualitative data analysis involves because analysis depends on the researchers criticality.

# Quality issues

- Results are believable from the perspective of the participant in the research. Researchers describe or understand the phenomena from the participant's eyes, the participants are the only ones who can legitimately judge the credibility of the results.
- **Careful planning and use of many data collection instruments** enhance trustworthiness of data

# Quality Issues

- Documents

- External criticism (authenticity/genuineness).

- Aims at the document rather than content. Looks at authorship (signature, writing styles), age (One can also use chemicals to check age of paper, ink)

- Internal criticism (trustworthiness/ accuracy).

- When satisfied with authenticity proceed to accuracy (relationship of writer to event, what was the intention of writing, how long after the event was it written, do they agree with other sources etc)

Pause

Questions

# Format of a Qualitative Study

Certainly, qualitative research varies in a range of ways that may prompt different understandings on what needs to be clarified and how this ought to be packaged.



# The Qualitative Doctoral Dissertation Proposal

- Introduction (Overview and Background)
- Problem
- Theoretical Perspective
- Questions
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Ethics
- Plan and Timelines

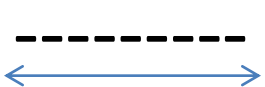
Kilbourn, B. (2006) The Qualitative Doctoral Dissertation Proposal. *Teachers College Record*.108 (4), pp. 529–576

# Problem

- It is grounded in the background or aligned to the context to the problem
- This is a broad statement rather than the specific questions the study seeks to address.
- *“Problems are usually constructed out of a complex interplay among one’s own thinking about an issue, one’s own experience, and one’s understanding of the research literature”.*  
(Kilbourn, 2006 p. 539)

*Distinguish between an educational  
problem and an educational  
research problem*

# Theoretical orientation

- This is critical when interpreting (phenomena) data
- Theory Application  Theory Development
- This is the basis for the key concepts used in the study

# Questions

- More specific than the general problem statement
- The questions indicate how the problem would be addressed
- **Sources:**
  - *Problem statement*
  - *Research literature*

# Literature review

- It shows what research has been done or not yet done with respect to the problem
- It is not always complete in a qualitative research proposal

# Some assertions...

- *No research has been done on the problem*
- *Some research has been done on the problem*
- *An abundance of research has been done*
- *There is an abundance of related literature*

# Methods

- It may start with justification of the inquiry chosen as appropriate to address the problem
- Tells about how the inquiry will be approached or how the questions will be answered
- **Data collection:** details on *who, what, when, where, how many* (participants, observations, interviews), *how frequent* (observations, interviews), *how long*, and so on.
- **Analysis and interpretation:** indicate *(1)* how the researcher plans to go about data analysis and *(2)* from what point of view or theoretical perspective the data will be interpreted.



# Ethics

- What the existing institutional requirements or protocols?
- Power-relations and privileges
- Confidentiality
- Etc.

# Plan and timelines

- These should be well thought-out and realistic.
- What are the key milestones in the proposed study

**Thank you**