Chapter 10
Typical Areas of Confusion for Students New to Qualitative Research

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Abstract Students who are new to qualitative research methods tend to struggle with a handful of key concepts. This chapter consists of some of my reflections regarding teaching introductory qualitative research methods courses for graduate students from a variety of fields. I detail the major challenges I have seen students struggle with in these classes, namely truth and objectivity, generalizability or lack thereof, positionality, and ambiguity. I interweave my perspectives about these challenges and hopefully provide some useful wisdom for students to take away.

This chapter consists of some of my reflections regarding teaching introductory qualitative research methods courses for graduate students from a variety of fields. My intent in this chapter is to detail the major challenges I have seen students struggle with in these classes or the aspects of qualitative research that students find most confusing. There are four areas that seem to give students the most discomfort, namely truth and objectivity, generalizability or lack thereof, positionality, and finally, the ambiguity seeming inherent in qualitative research. Throughout the chapter, I include my perspectives about these aspects and hopefully provide some useful wisdom for students taking such classes so that both they find it useful and it serves as a means to reduce their challenges and discomfort.

A note regarding social justice and equity before I get into the challenges for beginning students of qualitative methods. Many students in my qualitative courses intend to focus their dissertation work within areas of social justice and equity in education. Thus, with regard to teaching qualitative methods, it is important for me that students learn to struggle with the challenges they confront in the methodology in order to best and authentically reflect the perceptions and experiences of the participants in their

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future studies. Thus, knowing the literature thoroughly, understanding that multiple (even exponential) truths exist, and realizing that their positionality and identities are important to both the research process and the expression and representation of the findings are all relevant. I feel a particular responsibility to my students, the participants in their future studies, and the field, when I teach qualitative methods. That is, social justice and equity are important aspects of how and why I teach qualitative methods.

And now, on to the challenges. The issues I have seen students struggle with most in my qualitative classes are truth and objectivity, generalizability or lack thereof, positionality, and finally, the ambiguity seeming inherent in qualitative research. These areas seem to cause the students the most discomfort throughout the course. I detail each below.

Additionally, although I use a variety of texts and readings in my qualitative courses, I am relying heavily on the most recently adopted and main textbook from my courses, Merriam and Tisdell (2015), to support my claims here. I find this text to be very readable and students have found it to be an approachable source.

"Objectivity," Truth, and Multiple Realities

Every semester I have students who struggle with concepts related to epistemology, ontology, and axiology—the nature of knowledge, reality, and beliefs and values. And relatedly, when I ask them questions like "How do you know what you know?" and "How do you know what you know is true?" and "Is what is true for you also always true for me?" their responses go from relatively confident to not confident at all. I use this exercise to then discuss "truth" and "objectivity" in research. Many students, particularly those who have been exposed to more quantitative ideas about "research," have difficulty with this concept. "Objectivity," as they have been taught, is something—perhaps if not wholly attainable—is always a thing to strive for.

As a critical scholar and a qualitative researcher, my approach to "objectivity" is often unlike approaches of other faculty many of my introductory qualitative students have encountered or have studied under. Because we begin with a history (and within a present) of marginalization, that is, a structure of inequality—where individuals and groups have been and continue to be denied access to and the opportunity to contribute to "official knowledge" as we think of it through "research"—attaining "objectivity" is not possible. Even striving for such a goal seems not only improbable but unjust in a variety of ways, in my opinion. This does not mean that we should not adhere to principles of sound research—that is, we should do whatever we like without regard to established practices for ethical research. It does mean though that participants' realities are impacted by social, economic, political, and educational structures that have historically and presently limit access and opportunity. That is, the powerful exist, as do the disempowered. If we reflect on our history, the powerful have had access and opportunity to conduct research and create "knowledge." Thus, truth is relative, and a single truth is not attainable. What is true for one participant or group may not be true for another participant or group. Regardless of the approach to research—critical or not—the realities of power, and relatedly, access and opportunity, remain.

Qualitative researchers understand that reality is "holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 242). That under study in qualitative research, people's realities through their perceptions and experiences, is also not fixed or objective. Specific to this notion, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note "what is being investigated are people's constructions of reality—how they understand the world. And just as there will be multiple accounts of eyewitnesses to a crime, so too there will be multiple constructions of how people have experienced a particular phenomenon, how they have made meaning of their lives, or how they have come to understand certain processes" (p. 243).

The goals of qualitative approaches include to understand, to describe, to interpret, to empower, to deconstruct, to problematize, to question, to interrupt (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, instead of a "capital T," objective truth—and predicting, testing, and controlling—qualitative researchers are after something else. And that something else, according to Wolcott (as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), "is understanding" (p. 240). That is, we are after the multiple "lower case ts" with all of their messiness and pluralities.

Generalizability

Another concept that introductory qualitative students struggle with is generalizability. They often come to class with ideas that suggest that the only research that is worth conducting is research that can be generalized to people outside of the sample. When I tell them that the intent of qualitative research is to better understand the particular, and that qualitative work is not meant to be generalizable—they often ask, "Well, then, why would anyone conduct a qualitative study?"

This is a tough one both for me to explain and for students to understand. I ask them—"Have you read any quantitative studies that suggested that the findings are true for everyone?" Really, in my opinion, with any approach to research, one can only generalize to their own data—which is exactly what qualitative studies do. That is, as researchers, we can only discuss, interrogate, and project ideas from the data that we have collected and analyzed. With a qualitative study, however, researchers typically articulate the context and participant sample such that if a reader were to believe they had a similar problem, context, and population, they may well apply similar techniques and ask similar research questions. This then, would be one study that can be added to the literature to better inform our understanding of the whole. To illustrate this point about generalizability, I like to use a couple of analogies. Think of a stone mason building a brick wall, or puzzle that has yet to be assembled. Each study, whether it is qualitative or quantitative or mixed methods, participatory action research, or something else, is one brick—and the wall the bricks create is our understanding of a particular topic. Likewise, each study is a separate, individual puzzle piece, which helps to complete the puzzle. The

puzzle and the picture it creates represent our understanding of a particular topic. Any study, whatever the method, is just one piece of a larger body of knowledge—it is not *the* knowledge.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note that the challenges that students new to qualitative methods experience around generalizability are nothing new. They go on to note that "part of the difficulty lies in thinking of generalizability in the same way as do investigators using experimental or correlational designs" (p. 253). And, as I noted above, even in these types of approaches to research, "generalizations are made within specified levels of confidence" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 253).

With a goal of "understanding" and not "generalizing," there is much to be learned from qualitative research. Whether or not the findings from a qualitative study could also apply to another similar context is up to the reader to decide. Citing Lincoln and Guba, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state:

> the notion of "transferability," in which "the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do." The investigator needs to provide "sufficient descriptive data" to make transferability possible. (p. 254)

Thus, "validity" has traditionally been understood by qualitative researchers as "credibility." Because qualitative researchers will "never capture an objective 'truth' or 'reality,' the field has established a variety of strategies to increase the credibility or the "correspondence between research and the real world" (Wolcott as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 244). These include, but are not limited to, triangulation, member checks, peer debriefing, examining positionality, creating an audit trail, and prolonged engagement in the setting or research context. (See Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, chapter 9 for a detailed examination of strategies to bolster credibility in qualitative research.)

The matter of generalizability in qualitative research, whether "the extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 256) is up to the reader and the people in those other situations. However, it is the researcher's responsibility to articulate the context, participants, and methods in sufficient detail such that another researcher may apply similar methods in a similar context. This is what is referred to as rich, thick description—or "a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 257).

Positionality

Another area where students struggle is with "positionality," or how one, as the researcher, is positioned and how they are drawn to their research interests. For many students, they have never been asked to think deeply about why they want to study what they want to study. This can be an emotional process. Regardless, these interests should be interrogated. It is not as though we pick up research interests

from the super market or that they drop from the sky. They come from somewhere, and that somewhere is connected to our identities, histories, and experiences.

Positionality is not just a list of the identities that define us but a reflection of those identities, the power dynamics that have helped to shape those identities, as well as a consideration of why is this the right study for me? Why do I want to study this? Why is now the right time to conduct this study? (e.g., Why this? Why me? Why now?) (see Patel, 2015). Other critical questions students should attend to when thinking about how they personally connect to their research interests are What am I going to do with this research? Who benefits? How does who I am influence the claims I make on the data? How does who I am influence the research process? What changes will come about from the research?

With all of this come questions about qualitative research processes, the researcher as instrument, and about bias. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) offer a list of questions, including the following, which I am asked some version of every semester: "If the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, how can we be sure the researcher is a valid and reliable instrument? Isn't the researcher biased and just finding out what he or she expects to find? Don't people often lie to field researchers? If somebody else did this study, would they get the same results?" (p. 241).

Qualitative researchers attend to bias in several ways; a solid first step is articulating their positionality as this helps to get at the questions above about validity and reliability and expectations. To the questions about the truthfulness of a participant's responses, it is not our place as researchers to judge a participant's responses. After all, one person's truth is different from the next person's truth. And yes, two researchers will have different results. This is the nature of qualitative work.

Ambiguity

Another area that I find where students struggle is with the ambiguity that is inherent in qualitative research, that is, the lack of clear delineations between approaches and the overlap in the types of analytic strategies used in different approaches. Students' struggles with this seems to stem from two primary areas. The first is that of the researcher as the human instrument—and that as such, the researcher is in charge of how they design and conduct the work. The second is the overlap between the different approaches (or "traditions" as Cresswell refers to them). That is, students find it challenging to decipher between a phenomenological study and an interpretivist study—particularly as a researcher may use similar or identical data collection methods and analytic procedures in either approach.

The researcher as instrument is an important component of qualitative research and one that amplifies the importance of a researcher's positionality. Because the researcher is responsible for analyzing/coding the data, those data will undoubtedly be analyzed through the researcher's "lenses," that is, the ways the researcher views and understands the world, the ways they interpret experiences, as well as their histories and identities. This causes students to ask questions about bias and how

this will surely impact the data. Yes. It will. However, there are many ways in qualitative research that the researcher can work to establish the "validity" of the data (not objectivity) and ensure, as much as it is possible, that they take all necessary steps to reflect the participants' authentic experiences and perceptions. These steps may include a variety of techniques including bracketing, memoing, and reflexive journaling, as well as other strategies to establish trustworthiness such as member checking and peer debriefing. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) provide a useful list of ways to reinforce "validity" and "reliability" in qualitative research, see p. 259.

Students also get frustrated with the overlap of the methodological approaches in the various "traditions" in qualitative research. Specifically, one may use similar coding techniques in a case study and in an interpretivist study, as they might use in a phenomenological study. In their efforts to do it "right," students want to see distinct lines between the "traditions," and they simply do not exist. Rather, it is up to the researcher to clearly articulate why their study is phenomenological, a case study, an interpretivist study, or something else. The coding strategies, the means of establishing trustworthiness, and the means of increasing rigor and validity may be very similar in any of those studies. Embrace the ambiguity, I say. And convince your readers that the finding of your study are "worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290) with the proper criteria for such an approach.

Final Thoughts

Qualitative research can be difficult for students who have been exposed only to quantitative research to fully embrace, especially in the beginning. However, I do believe that most of the students in my classes come away with a different and broader understanding of research, and appreciate the value of qualitative work. One of the things I say in my classes is "If you learn nothing else from me, learn this. Your research questions will guide your methodology, not the other way around." So, if qualitative research methods speak to you and you think you might want to apply them in your dissertation work, be sure to ask appropriate research questions.

A final note about qualitative software. Students typically want to know about coding software—and how it can lighten their load in terms of analysis. Qualitative analyses are inductive and are based on the researcher's knowledge of the field and the context. Moreover, as analyses are individualistic (e.g., different researchers will see different things in the data), it is impossible for a computer program to "code" the data intuitively. These programs, such as NVivo, ATLAS.ti, Dedoose, and others, are good storage facilities for your data—which may make it easier to keep track of and organize. Further, if a researcher is after understanding how many times a word or phrase is said, these programs can calculate that and create some related graphics. However, the researcher is still responsible for "coding" the data.

References

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