

Basic Interpretive Qualitative Research

A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. Constructionism thus underlies what I am calling a basic interpretive qualitative study. Here the researcher is interested in understanding the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved. Meaning however, “is not discovered but constructed. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it. . . . Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–43).

Phenomenology and symbolic interactionism also inform interpretive qualitative research. From phenomenology comes the idea that people interpret everyday experiences from the perspective of the meaning it has for them. “What phenomenologists emphasize, then, is the subjective aspects of people’s behavior. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects (Geertz, 1973) in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 34). Symbolic interaction also focuses on interpretation but within the context of the larger society; that is, the meaning of an experience is constructed by an individual interacting with other people; meaning is formed as the person intersects with society. From a research perspective, “the emphasis [is] on putting oneself in the place of the other and seeing things from the perspective of others” (Crotty, 1998, p. 76). Even the self is a social construction, a self-definition generated through interaction with other people. Since the self in interaction with others is an ongoing process, people can “change and grow as they learn more about themselves through this interactive process” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 37).

Thus drawing from phenomenology and symbolic interaction in particular, qualitative researchers conducting a basic interpretive study would be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to *understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. While this understanding characterizes all of qualitative research, other types of qualitative studies have an *additional* purpose. For example, a grounded theory study seeks not to just understand, but to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest. A phenomenological study seeks understanding about the essence and the underlying structure of the phenomenon. Narrative analysis uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experience as revealed in the story. Ethnography strives to understand the interaction of individuals not just with others, but with the *culture* of the society in which they live. Qualitative case studies, while interpretive, endeavor to present a holistic, in-depth description of the total system or case. Finally, with reference to the other types of qualitative research presented in this volume, both critical and postmodern studies interpret phenomena through the additional lenses of critical, feminist, and postmodern theory.

Basic interpretive qualitative studies can be found throughout the disciplines and in applied fields of practice. They are probably the most common form of qualitative research found in education, for example. In an interpretive study of educational practice, a researcher might draw upon concepts, models, and theories in educational psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, or sociology to frame the study. Data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis. What questions are asked, what is observed, and what documents are deemed relevant will depend on the disciplinary theoretical framework of the study. An educational psychologist for example, might be interested in understanding the teaching-learning transaction in a classroom, while someone with a sociological frame would be more interested in questions of social roles and social interaction patterns in the same classroom. The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns (presented as categories, factors, variables, themes) that cut through the data. Findings are a mix of these recurring patterns supported by the data from which they were derived. The overall interpretation will be the researcher's understanding, mediated by his or her particular disciplinary perspective, of the participants' understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

There are two examples of basic interpretive research studies included in this collection of qualitative articles. Merriam and Muhamad's (2000) goal is to understand the nature of learning for older adults in the non-Western society of Malaysia. Some might assume, because this study was conducted in a different culture and the concept of cultural values was used to frame the study and interpret the data, that this is an ethnography. Certainly there are elements of ethnography embedded in this study, but there was no extended stay at the research site, nor was there a full sociocultural interpretation of the data as would be common in an ethnography. Rather, we were interested in how older adults understood learning

at this stage of their lives, and how those understandings were shaped by their interactions with others in the society in which they live.

The second selection by Tisdell (2000) reports on a study of the link between spirituality and social action of women adult educators. Tisdell wanted to *understand* how “women perceive and carry out their work as emancipatory educators.” Tisdell framed her study from a developmental perspective, but one that takes into account the sociocultural context in which the development occurs. With her interest in social action, women, and culture, there are aspects of critical and emancipatory theory, feminist theory, and ethnography present in her study; however, it is still primarily a basic interpretive study. Tisdell speaks to this in her reflection immediately following the article: “What began as a largely interpretive study in its first phase as reported here, has now developed into an ongoing participatory action research study.”

In summary, all qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds. The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings. The inquiry is always framed by some disciplinary-based concepts, model, or theory (as, for example, cultural values and spiritual development in the above studies).

References

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- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
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