

Writeup of Becker (1996)

Becker, H. S. (1996). The epistemology of qualitative research. In R. Jessor, A. Colby, & R. A. Shweder (Eds.), *Ethnography and human development: Context and meaning in social inquiry* (pp. 53-71). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Summary

Becker (1996) discussed the division in epistemologies between qualitative and quantitative research, despite them having similar goals and often naturally following from each other. Rather than concentrating on what “ought” to be the case, Becker focused on what “is,” what the differences are in practice between the two methodological approaches. He stated they raise different kinds of questions (explanation of numerical differences vs. description of relations and organizations) and gather different levels and amounts of data (quantitative being more restricted). He surveyed other important parts of the qualitative epistemology, including (a) the need to accurately grasp the actor’s point of view and be “as undecided [or not] as the actors we study” (p. 60); (b) an emphasis on the everyday world “in situ,” rather than extrapolating or inferring based on the “simpler, less expensive, less time-consuming world” assumed by quantitative researchers (p. 61); (c) a belief in thicker, fuller, broader descriptions being better than thinner, shorter descriptions requiring more inferences and assumptions; (d) the use of whichever methods—qualitative or quantitative—apply best to a particular problem; and (e) a focus on credibility, accuracy, breadth, fullness, and closeness as measures of validity, in contrast to the usual view of validity in quantitative research.

Analysis

It is important to note that Becker is from the Chicago school of sociology, and follows Park—the founder of that school—in advocating for ecological approaches and ethnographic methods. As such his viewpoint was slightly biased towards these, although he takes great pains to not ignore other approaches and epistemological viewpoints, both qualitative and quantitative, throughout his chapter. His arguments are certainly persuasive and fit well with other qualitative research literature, as long as one remembers that not all researchers (qualitative or quantitative) think or act alike. Epistemologies will vary, but there are still many commonalities both between qualitative and quantitative researchers (as Becker notes) and within the qualitative research tent. I would recommend his article as a useful discussion of the epistemological viewpoints common in qualitative research.

Keywords: epistemology, ecological, ethnography, credibility, accuracy, validity, thick description, closeness to actor

Writeup of Denzin and Lincoln (2008)

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2008). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 1-44). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

Summary

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) considered the issues that factor into defining qualitative research and its place in the research landscape, a place that is situated in historical, political, and cultural contexts. They saw the qualitative researcher as a “*bricoleur*, as a maker of quilts” (p. 5), as using montages to “create and bring psychological and emotional unity—a pattern—to an interpretive experience” (p. 7). They also stressed that such research does not privilege a particular method, theory, paradigm, or discipline. Their definition (p. 10) reflected these points, stressing conflicts between multiple epistemologies and paradigms and further political and cultural tensions. Denzin and Lincoln also presented a discussion of qualitative versus quantitative research, noting that the former is more accepting “of postmodern sensibilities” and multiple perspectives (p. 15). They also cited and agreed with most of Becker’s (1996) points of difference, albeit stating (correctly) that not all groups of qualitative researchers share in such agreement.

Much of their article presented a timeline of “at least eight historical moments” (p. 3) in qualitative research, each “still operating in the present” (p. 27). These are the

- (a) traditional, positivistic period to 1945;
- (b) modernist phase from 1945-1970, drawing on postpositivism and new interpretive theories;
- (c) “moment of blurred genres” from 1970 to 1986, where a “pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended perspective” increasingly blurred the lines between the social sciences and humanities (pp. 23-24);
- (d) “crisis of representation” in the mid-late 1980s that challenged old “models of truth, method, and representation” (p. 25);
- (e) “postmodern period of experimental ethnographic writing” in the early 1990s, which further explored new methods and models and focused on “local, small-scale theories” (p. 27);

- (f) “moment of postexperimental inquiry” from 1995 to 2000, which focused on experimental and interpretive ethnographies and continued to blur the lines between social sciences and humanities (p. 27);
- (g) “methodologically contested present” from 2000 to 2004, “a period of conflict, great tension, and, in some quarters, retrenchment” (p. 27); and
- (h) “future” that Denzin and Lincoln felt would confront “the methodological backlash associated with the evidence-based social movement” and be “concerned with moral discourse” (p. 3).

Denzin and Lincoln’s final pages examined the qualitative research process in five phases, each of which influences the resulting research. These, summarized in their Table 1.1 (p. 30) included (a) the researcher’s place in a multicultural, ethical, political, and historical context; (b) the theoretical and epistemological paradigms and perspectives taken by the researcher (e.g. postpositivist, constructivist, etc.), summarized in their Table 1.2 (p. 32); (c) the research strategies used by the researcher (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory, case study, etc.); (d) the actual methodologies and analyses used (e.g. interviews, observations, computer-assisted analysis); and (e) the interpretation and evaluation of research results.

Analysis

This was quite a difficult chapter to summarize, both for its length and because Denzin and Lincoln were rarely succinct or entirely coherent in their discussion of qualitative research and its place in various contexts. The important points from the first third were easier to extract, despite the detailed writing style of the authors. The timeline section started off relatively usefully and understandably, but the latter four “moments” defined by Denzin and Lincoln began to blur together themselves, perhaps because those moments which they participated in themselves were harder to clearly define. The final portion of the chapter, discussing the research process, was much clearer in comparison and is more practically useful and important, despite having the fewest pages devoted to it. While Denzin and Lincoln certainly provided an important and interesting perspective on qualitative methods, I could only wholeheartedly recommend the section on the research process to a student or beginning researcher. I would suggest other readings with greater clarity before the other sections.

Keywords: historical, political, cultural, contexts, defining qualitative methods, epistemologies, paradigms, perspectives, moments, timeline, research process

Writeup of Holloway and Todres (2003)

Holloway, I., & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: Flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative Research*, 3(3), 345-357. doi:10.1177/1468794103033004

Summary

Holloway and Todres (2003) argued that there are two common approaches to qualitative research. One involves using “what works” for any particular problem, focusing on being flexible in the research process (p. 346) and thus on “the primacy of the topic or phenomenon to be studied” (p. 347). The second approach does not believe in “method-slurring” and that it is more valuable to “consistently pursu[e] the integrity of a particular approach from beginning to end” (p. 346). Arguing for a middle-ground approach that provides for consistency and coherence within individual methods and flexibility between them, they examined phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography in this context. All three approaches featured coherence and consistency, albeit through different approaches, processes, and techniques. All three were also flexible enough to have aspects of them be used in combination with other approaches, and each also had other ways of making flexibility possible. Nevertheless, there were many distinctions between the approaches (summarized in their Figure 1, pp. 348-349). Holloway and Todres argued that the tension between and within each approach and between coherence, consistency, and flexibility meant researchers should consider “the intentions and philosophical underpinning”—the epistemology—“of different approaches in greater depth” before, during, and after using such approaches (p. 355). They also recommend including discussion of the chosen approach / epistemology and its relation to validity when writing up qualitative research.

Analysis

Holloway and Todres’s analysis was interesting and insightful, but it is their conclusions that had the most weight in this article. By arguing that researchers must consider the issues of coherence, consistency, and flexibility when considering different epistemological and methodological approaches, they make a persuasive case for researchers fully understanding any and all approaches they may consider and take when conducting qualitative research. Their middle-ground approach does not mean aspects of different methods and epistemologies cannot be combined when necessary and useful, nor does it mean complete flexibility to throw methods and epistemologies at a problem and see what sticks. Instead, they argue—correctly, I feel—for a

reasoned, thoughtful consideration of methods, research problems, and epistemologies as they relate to each other and the issues of coherence, consistency, flexibility, and validity.

Keywords: flexibility, consistency, coherence, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, epistemology, tensions, validity

Writeup of Mason (1996)

Mason, J. (1996). Planning and designing qualitative research. In *Qualitative researching* (pp. 9-34). London, UK: Sage.

[Note: I read the first edition rather than the second (as indicated in Fidel's syllabus) because FSU only had the first edition. The second edition would have required waiting on an ILL request.]

Summary

Mason (1996) discussed the process of planning and designing qualitative research projects, arguing it was necessary despite the common fluidity of such research because of the need for “coherent and rigorous development of [a] project” (p. 10). She suggested five steps, driven by questions that researchers should ask when planning and designing research. First, decide on an ontological approach to “social ‘reality’”: “what is the nature of the phenomena” to be investigated (p. 11)? Second, decide on an epistemology, or “theory of knowledge”: “what might represent knowledge of evidence of the ... social ‘reality’” to be investigated (p. 13)? Third, decide “what topic ... the research [is] concerned with” (p. 13). Fourth, identify “the intellectual puzzle... what are [the] research questions?” (p. 14). Mason suggested starting with the ontological and epistemological assumptions about a topic, then moving to specific, carefully constructed research questions of interest. Finally, determine both the stated and unstated “purpose[s] of [the] research ... what is [the] research for” (p. 18)? Mason also discussed how to decide on a given set of method(s) and data source(s), suggesting drawing up a chart of research questions, data sources and methods, justifications for these, notes on practicality, and ethical issues. She included a number of other questions that would help researchers explore these elements and put them together into a rigorous research plan and design.

Analysis

Mason's article provides a very useful approach to the design of qualitative research, and indeed to the process of becoming such a researcher in the first place. Any student or beginning researcher looking to begin conducting such research needs to consider the ontological and epistemological positions they could take in their research agenda carefully, and Mason argued persuasively for this to occur prior to any substantial consideration of research questions. Unfortunately, this does not always happen and is not always possible due to other pressures and circumstances, and so the strict step-by-step model of the qualitative research process she

proposed will not always work exactly that way in practice. The questions and steps she raised are still important considerations for any qualitative researcher, however, even if the order is different or there is more interaction between the steps.

Keywords: ontological, social reality, epistemology, epistemological, research process, research design, research questions, purpose

Writeup of Rogers-Dillon (2005)

Rogers-Dillon, R. H. (2005). Hierarchical qualitative research teams: Refining the methodology. *Qualitative Research*, 5(4), 437-454. doi:10.1177/1468794105056922

Summary

Rogers-Dillon's (2005) article, drawing heavily on her own experiences, explored the tension surrounding qualitative research that is done by teams of researchers—consisting of primary investigators (PIs) and research assistants (RAs)—rather than individuals. She argued that PIs must allow RAs to have a degree of flexibility and authority in judgment and ethics without “abandoning the scientific method altogether” (p. 442). She also discussed (a) the “power dynamics” within research teams (p. 443), where RAs may feel powerless to improve the design, methodology, or ethics of a project; (b) emotional stress, which PIs have previously experienced and managed but that RAs may have difficulty with; and (c) disagreements over the ownership of ideas within a research team. Rogers-Dillon argued that “despite the tensions ... it [is] difficult to conclude that these teams should not be a part of the methodological tool kit in the social sciences” (p. 449); there are substantial advantages to collaborative research where graduate students learn from more experienced researchers. She made seven specific suggestions for minimizing the impact of tensions, not all of which “will be appropriate for all projects or all researchers” (p. 452). These were to (a) “make power dynamics explicit” within the team, (b) “have an ethics clause” to be sure RAs do not violate their own ethics, (c) “separate out collaboration” to minimize intellectual property issues, (d) “clarify what is social” and how RAs should act in the situations under study, (e) provide “hazard pay” if conditions are harsher or more hazardous than usual, (f) possibly “pay for breaks” if RAs need to release pressure, and (g) allow RAs to write “theoretical memos” to “process what they have been observing and make order out of it” (pp. 452-453).

Analysis

Rogers-Dillon's article provides a needed perspective on qualitative research, especially since (as she correctly stated) such research is increasingly performed by teams rather than by sole researchers. Team dynamics are not always the same, of course; some teams may work very well informally without need for formal rules or the use of her suggestions, while others may need much more formal structure and may use all of her suggestions. In the LIS field research is increasingly collaborative and so her article will only grow in importance over time. Even if a

given student or researcher does not use all of her suggestions in the teams they participate in, they must acknowledge the usefulness of her suggestions and appreciate her wide-ranging discussion of the tension that may occur in qualitative research teams.

Keywords: research teams, collaboration, research assistants, tensions, ethics, judgments, flexibility, authority, power dynamics, emotional stress, intellectual property, theoretical memos

Writeup of Fidel (1993)

Fidel, R. (1993). Qualitative methods in information retrieval research. *Library and Information Science Research*, 15(3), 219-247.

Summary

Fidel (1993) attempted to define what qualitative research is, noting it has “no short, elegant, and universally agreed-upon definition” (p. 220) but is usually “guided by the belief in the primacy of *subject matter* over method” (p. 221). She identified a number of key characteristics of qualitative research—as applied to what she termed “information retrieval” research but what is now known as information behavior research—and gave numerous examples of and context for each from the literature. She said such research

- (a) does not manipulate or control people, seeking to understand them “from their own point of view” (p. 222);
- (b) is “both holistic and case-oriented” simultaneously (p. 224);
- (c) “focuses ... [and] centers on” the “dynamics” of processes (p. 225);
- (d) “is open and flexible ... to whatever emerges” (p. 226);
- (e) “uses multiple methods” for collecting, analyzing, and triangulating data (p. 227);
- (f) “codes data” in a process “much like indexing or classifying” (p. 228);
- (g) “is humanistic,” developing “relationship[s] between the qualitative researcher[s] and respondents” (p. 229);
- (h) “is inductive,” the one attribute “most typical of qualitative research” (p. 231); and
- (i) “is scientific” and valid, albeit not in the sense meant in positivistic research (p. 231).

Fidel also noted that there are increasing numbers of qualitative research studies in “information retrieval” (p. 233)—again, actually information behavior research— and discussed a number of useful sources for learning qualitative methods, “its theoretical underpinning, and ... [specific] methods and techniques” (p. 235)

Analysis

Fidel provides a useful overview of qualitative methods as it relates to the field of information behavior. While her article is now rather old and quite out-of-date as to the literature it cites within the LIS field, the nine characteristics of qualitative research she mentions are still true today and are of great relevance. Some of them do indicate her epistemological and ontological biases; in particular she believes strongly in an actor-centric viewpoint, in highly

flexible research designs, and that the problem under study is more important than the method used. In addition, the use of “information retrieval” rather than “information behavior” as the name of the research area is confusing, but perhaps expected given the age of Fidel’s article. I would certainly recommend it as a good introductory reading for students and beginning researchers in information behavior who wish to learn more about qualitative methods, particularly when combined with more practice-oriented readings such as Mason (1996) and Westbrook (1997).

Keywords: information behavior, information seeking, information retrieval, viewpoint, processes, flexibility, triangulation, coding, inductive, validity

Writeup of Sutton (2010)

Sutton, B. (2010). Qualitative research methods in library and information science. In M. J. Bates & M. N. Maack (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* (3rd ed., pp. 4380-4393). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.

Summary

Sutton provided an overview of qualitative research methods and their application in the library and information science (LIS) field. He considered LIS to be very diverse, saying it should use a “pluralistic methodology” (p. 4381) drawing from “the entire range ... used in the social sciences” in order to solve its problems (p. 4380). He reviewed the historical literature relating to methodology in LIS, finding that—“with some notable and mostly recent exceptions” (p. 4383)—it had favored a quantitative, positivistic epistemology, betraying “very little awareness of qualitative methods ... [and of] qualitative, interpretive, and naturalistic approaches to research” (p. 4384). Sutton then discussed empiricism, naturalism, constructivism, and symbolic interactionism, some of the significant “theoretical propositions upon which qualitative research [may be] based” (p. 4384). He also discussed some key characteristics of qualitative research, including (a) its emphasis on “discovery over explanation” (p. 4385); (b) its consideration “of relativism and pluralism” (p. 4385); (c) “its accommodation of subjectivity” (p. 4386); and (d) a heightened awareness of “issues of values and ethics” (p. 4387). Sutton then moved to discussing the methods and tools used in qualitative research, including historical approaches, ethnographic participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, the case-study model, the grounded theory approach, and ethnomethodology, providing a brief overview of each of these. He also noted that, in all of these methods, that “there is no form of data more important ... than language” (p. 4389); qualitative research aims to “elicit, organize, process, and analyze both written and spoken language” (p. 4389).

Analysis

Sutton’s article, while certainly providing a broad overview of qualitative methods, appeared to betray some biases; he did not present the entire range of qualitative methods, epistemologies, and theoretical approaches presented by some other authors (e.g. Holloway & Todres, 2003), and did not present all of the important characteristics of qualitative research (particularly many of those raised by Becker, 1996; and Fidel, 1993). His article was also a little dense to read, missing subheadings and other visual breaks that would make it easier to follow

without having to carefully consider its structure. Finally, Sutton's history of qualitative research in LIS stopped in the early 1990s, not including many of the studies mentioned by Fidel (1993) or later works; even given the article's original publication date of 1998, there is a gap of at least five or six years of missing literature. Because of these issues I feel Sutton's article should not be relied upon for a thorough understanding of qualitative methods or how they have been used within the LIS field, but instead should only serve as an introductory piece to be fleshed out further by other readings that present other epistemologies, characteristics, approaches, and studies.

Keywords: history of qualitative methods, interpretive, naturalistic, empiricism, naturalism, constructivism, symbolic interactionism, relativism, pluralism, subjectivity, historical approach, ethnography, participant observation, interviewing, case study approach, grounded theory, ethnomethodology, epistemology, introductory

Writeup of Westbrook (1997)

Westbrook, L. (1997). Qualitative research. In R. R. Powell (Ed.), *Basic research methods for librarians* (3rd ed., pp. 143-163). Greenwich, CT: Ablex.

Summary

Westbrook (1997) started her chapter by discussing what she called “the underlying principles of naturalistic work” (p. 143): it is aware of “the flexibility and sensitivity of the human instrument ... posits reality as holistic and continually changing ... [and] centers on understanding rather than predicting” (p. 144). However, it has only become accepted in library and information science (LIS) research recently, particularly for less-explored areas. Westbrook stressed that maintaining confidentiality and balancing benefits and harms are important ethical issues when conducting qualitative research. She also discussed the different sampling techniques employed in qualitative research—purposive, maximum variety, extreme case, intensity, and snowball sampling—as well as the need to achieve saturation and the effect of the nature of the research question on the sample size chosen. Westbrook further reviewed common data gathering techniques, focusing on observations (including complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, and complete observer), interviews (of various lengths and along a structured-unstructured continuum), and documents (including surveys and written records); each of these sections includes useful references for further information. She then turned to methods of data analysis, focusing on content analysis using the constant comparative method—“joint coding and analysis during the continual review of data to gradually form categories” (p. 155)—with an eye to eventually generating grounded theory. She noted that such coding “identifies the main categories as well as associated subcategories so that, eventually, all units of data can be categorized according to these codes” (pp. 155-156). Again, she included many useful references and tips drawn from them that can help in coding and analyzing data. She concluded with sections on “ensuring integrity” (p. 160)—similar to validity in quantitative research—and on presenting the findings of qualitative research (p. 162).

Analysis

Westbrook’s chapter provides a useful companion to Fidel’s (1993) article. Fidel focused on key characteristics of qualitative research in LIS and on existing qualitative studies, while Westbrook was more concerned with the practical issues of sampling, data collection, analysis, and coding. Of the other readings, only Mason (1996) and Denzin and Lincoln (2008) really

focused on the research process, and they did not specifically look at issues within LIS. Unfortunately, Westbrook did focus on the constant comparative method and grounded theory approach, which limits the applicability of that portion of her chapter. Still, I would highly recommend her reading to anyone interested in the practice of qualitative research, particularly if they wanted to follow a grounded theory approach to data analysis.

Keywords: principles, epistemology, ethics, confidentiality, benefits and harms, sampling, saturation, observations, interviews, documents, content analysis, constant comparative method, coding, grounded theory, integrity, presenting findings