Qualitative Methodology: An Overview

Drawn from social sciences such as anthropology and sociology, qualitative methodology is a general term for a family of approaches that shares a view of a program (or other phenomenon of interest) as an intricate composite of stakeholders' perceptions and experiences. Qualitative practitioners seek an insider's emic rather than an outsider's etic understanding. Prolonged engagement in the field provides opportunity to recognize patterns of behavior, themes and variations, nuances and subtleties, articulated and inarticulate meanings. In a process known as emergent design or progressive focusing, qualitative research questions and plans are revised during data collection as stakeholder experiences are better understood.

Interpretivism's historical and philosophical roots lie in 18th-century German distinctions between natural science and social science. Focusing on human meaning making, interpretive research was intended to discover the meanings people give to what they see and experience. These efforts foreshadowed Erickson's (1986) 20th-century admonition to "put mind back in the picture, in the central place it now occupies in cognitive psychology" (127, emphasis in the original) rather than trying to eliminate researcher subjectivity through futile attempts to achieve objectivity. Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1989, 1994) incorporated these ideas into a proposal for a constructivist paradigm in research, featuring a vision of truth as individually constructed and therefore multiple. Inquiry within this paradigm is a search for understanding of the human meanings given to social phenomena.

- Qualitative practitioners view the world differently than do their quantitative colleagues and, as a result, regard their tasks and responsibilities differently. Quantitative and qualitative research are based on different paradigms and many, not all, qualitative researchers consider the divergence as representing fundamental differences of philosophy and approach that are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. A paradigm is "an integrated set of theoretical presuppositions that lead the researcher to see the world of one's research interest in a particular way" (Erickson 1986:120, after Kuhn 1962). As a framework for understanding what knowledge is and how it may be sought, the research paradigm one prefers may determine the following:
- **What constitutes data.** For example, should unplanned conversations with program personnel be considered data? Or observations of ordinary program events? Or participants’ statements about program quality that include obvious bias?
- **How data may appropriately be collected and analyzed.** For example, are numerical indicators needed to determine program outcomes? Can human experiences be recorded and analyzed to discover program quality? Is, for example, quantifiable survey data more useful than unquantifiable interview data?
- **What constitutes an appropriate research or evaluation product.** For example, is deep understanding of a program in context as important to clients as a written report with charts and recommendations?
- **How the quality of that product may be judged.** For example, to be credible, must an evaluation provide experimental group, control group, or pre-post-program comparisons? Are experiential narratives credible and useful?

Qualitative-quantitative differences are essentially epistemological (i.e., differences in understandings of what constitutes knowledge) but most easily seen in different approaches to design, data collection, data analysis, reporting, and use. Qualitative and quantitative inquiry have sometimes been described as *epistemologically incommensurable* or *methodologically incommensurable*—that is, so fundamentally different that there can be no agreement, no collaboration, no mixing of methods. In the 1980s and 1990s, disagreements within the research and evaluation communities were so heated they came to be called the “paradigm wars.” The strife was ultimately declared over by some or seen as different points along a continuum of inquiry by others. However, despite significant progress, the underlying differences of approach have not been completely reconciled, as seen in the proposal by the U.S. government to prefer “scientifically based evidence” obtained through certain quantitative designs described as more scientific or rigorous (U.S. Department of Education 2003; see also American Evaluation Association 2003; Shavelson and Towne 2002; Viadero 2004).

Evaluators may have been among the first to move pragmatically beyond this disagreement. Recognizing the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, they found ways to combine them in mixed-methods designs (see Chapter 13). Sometimes, mixing methods works well. Other times, one paradigm or the other clearly dominates, limiting use or the advantages of the other. Major use of one approach and minor use of the other may be appropriate to the evaluation question or may be necessitated by constrained resources. For example, a quantitative evaluation may rely primarily on numerical data from surveys, tests, or demographics, using a qualitative pilot study only to facilitate the subsequent evaluation design or to provide a bit of qualitative triangulation for quantitative data. Or a qualitative evaluation may emphasize systematic observations and stakeholder interviews, using quantitative survey and demographic data only for an explanation of the larger context. In such cases, evaluators may be balancing methodological choices against RWE constraints or may believe they are using both qualitative and quantitative methods well, not recognizing the priority they are actually giving their personal preferences. Fortunately, mixed methods can be used effectively by evaluators or evaluation teams with training and experience in both approaches.