



Qualitative Research and Case Study

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Qualitative. Qualitative. Qualitative. What does it mean?

Student cumulative files provide close, individualized details of human vitality and response to various courses and tests. These records are both measurement-oriented and practitioner-interpreted, shading from the quantitative into the qualitative. The dialogue of professional development comes closer to the qualitative, where interpretation and implication are expressed against a background of human understanding.

My Ilish Friend Joy Conlan is doing a qualitative study of nursing care in Dublin. Joy is a nurse studying palliative care, the administration of analgesics. Not long ago, Irish nurses were newly authorized to administer Ibuprofen and to prescribe drugs. Joy wanted to find out how this responsibility was being handled. She was not so interested in : if and how the use of palliatives had changed, but in what was the activity and discourse of nurses in this new situation. Was the role of drug persentation changing nursing practice?

Jo observaed a children's ward over an extend period of time. She interviewed nurses and patients, and sometimes doctors and administrators. She examined patient records. She paid particular attention to the experience of the people involved. Here is an observation from her data (Conlon,2009).

"Neither child had a pain assessment tool in their chart and, administration of the 'PRN' analgesia was based on the nurses' subjective judgment. The chart read, "Analgesia given with effect..." No evaluation of such interventions was documented in the notes."

There are lots of ways to do qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Linclon, 2006). Joy was following a typical path, describing the activity, getting lots of quotes, being sensitive to the rush of time.

The stories people told her got into her data bank, but it was her research question that structured her attention: What is happening? Is patient care here now more immediate? Do these nurses rely more on past experience or on pain assessment? Conlon wrote,

"I knew the baby was experiencing anxiety whenever any of us tried to changed his nappy...He had received inconsistent analgesia following his surgery (PRN paracetamol and brufen roughly every 6 to 12 hours for 5 days)...he was now to have the catheter removed. I knew he wouldn't settle. Given his current behavior and aversion to nappy changes, his mother could have serious problems with him when they were discharged...So I approached the nurse I was shadowing and asked for sedation to be charted... She replied,...'The doctors don't usually give sedation for the removal of stitches and the catheter.'"...

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It would be wrong to say that qualitative research is more humane. Some of it is empathic. Some of it is not. Interrogators at Guantanamo Bay have used qualitative methods. Not necessarily humane, but qualitative research does rely on human perception and understanding

The words “qualitative” mean different things to different people. It is not my intent to attach new or official meanings to often-used words. We accommodate to a world that has diversity of thinking and a diversity of meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006).

I am a constructivist. I follow the strategy of The Oxford English Dictionary : Finding definition in past use of words. The task becomes more difficult when a word with common meaning, such as “qualitative” is taken up as the central theme of a guild or coterie, such as a group of researchers.

How do qualitative researchers define “qualitative?” Their “qualitative” means the close, experiential detail, and grand overview, of human situations and episodes. In qualitative research, we observe the ordinary practice of human interaction, seeking its complexity, sometimes following plan and deliberation, sometimes following intuition, to gain greater understanding of activity in a particular habitat.

Qualitative research relies relatively little on measurement. The researchers themselves are the main instruments. Nineteenth Century philosopher William Dilthey said,

“Only from his actions, from his immutable demonstrations, and also from the effect produced in others, human beings are able to learn about themselves; this way one learns to better understand he himself by the circular way of comprehension. What we were, the way we developed ourselves to become who we currently are, is learnt by the way in which we behave and by the plans we made and follow... we understand ourselves and even the stars, when we tell others our lived experiences.”

I see four main characteristics distinguishing qualitative research. You will find an expanded version in my book, Qualitative Research : Studying How Things Work. The short version is as follows

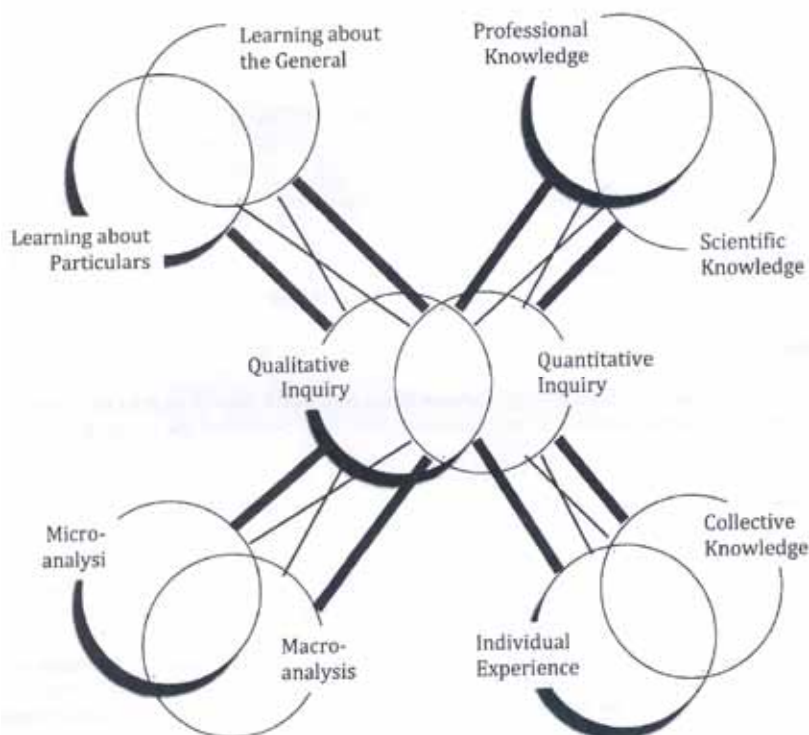
Special characteristics of Qualitative Study

1. Qualitative study is holistic. It on the meanings of human affairs as seen from different views.
2. Qualitative study is experiential. It is empirical, carried out through the human senses. It is field oriented.
3. Qualitative study is situational. It recognizes the uniqueness of the moment, the place, the words spoken.
4. Qualitative study is personal. It works to understand individual perceptions. It seeks uniqueness more than commonality. It honors diversity.



The difference between quantitative and qualitative research has more to do with how you think than with whether or not you are using numbers. Qualitative research is thinking of things using ordinary language description of human experience. Quantitative research is thinking of things using variables, indicators, and measurements. Such can be representations of human experience are coded so that they aggregate across lots of humans, making a science of human experience. But many people, including professionals, much of the time, want to keep thinking about individual human beings. Qualitative inquiry has us thinking about individuals and their settings: settings, situations, contexts.

Figure 1. A whirlygig of strong and weaker epistemological ties of qualitative inquiry.





Here in the center we have Qualitative Inquiry and Quantitative Inquiry. Look at the heavier bars to identify the thinking that Qualitative Inquiry is connected to. You see it connected to Learning the Particular (individual, case, situation). You see it connected to Professional Knowledge. You see it connected to Individual Experience (Singular, Personal) and then connected to Micro-Analysis, the close inspection of the individual case.

In contrast, Quantitative Inquiry is associated with learning the general, with scientific knowledge, knowledge of the collective (aggregations, populations) and macro-analysis that leads to grand generalizations. These are not exclusive connections as the lighter bars show. Qualitative inquiry is sometimes associated with macro-analysis, as in a patient record in Joy Conlon's study.

Case Study. One of the most common forms of qualitative inquiry is the case study. There are many kinds of case studies: qualitative, evaluative, biographical, legal, pedagogical. But perhaps the majority of case studies are qualitative.

The case study is the study of a single case, such as a person or a family. The case that Joy Conlon studied was a children's ward in a hospital. She herself worked in that hospital and did her research there. Conlon's was a qualitative case study because, as you already know, it was experiential, situational, personalistic and multiply perceived. Although she used assessment of pain partly with a "happy faces to sad faces" scale, she was herself her primary instrument. She observed the behavior. She heard the quotes.

Some people have little respect for case studies as research, claiming them too subjective, claiming that we cannot properly make generalizations from a single case. Certainly, caution is needed, but Danish philosopher Bent Flyvbjerg (2001) makes a strong case that case studies assist general understanding and, indeed, that they assist science. It is in the very deepest complexity of the case that generalizations can be refined by case study.

A case study usually has one or more research questions, in addition to "What is happening?" I call these research questions "issues." They are more than "problems." They are contentions, puzzlements, sometimes theoretical disagreements. We use the issues to understand the case better. Often the issues and the case compete for the researcher's attention.

It is not uncommon for researchers to be more interested in the issue than the case. They want to understand better a phenomenon or a widespread problem. So we include issues in designing the study.

A case study can be used to study a phenomenon, a relationship, a functioning. The case would be a particular example of it. The case is an entity, a thing. The case could be: an evaluand, a life, an institution being researched, a person's action-research. An

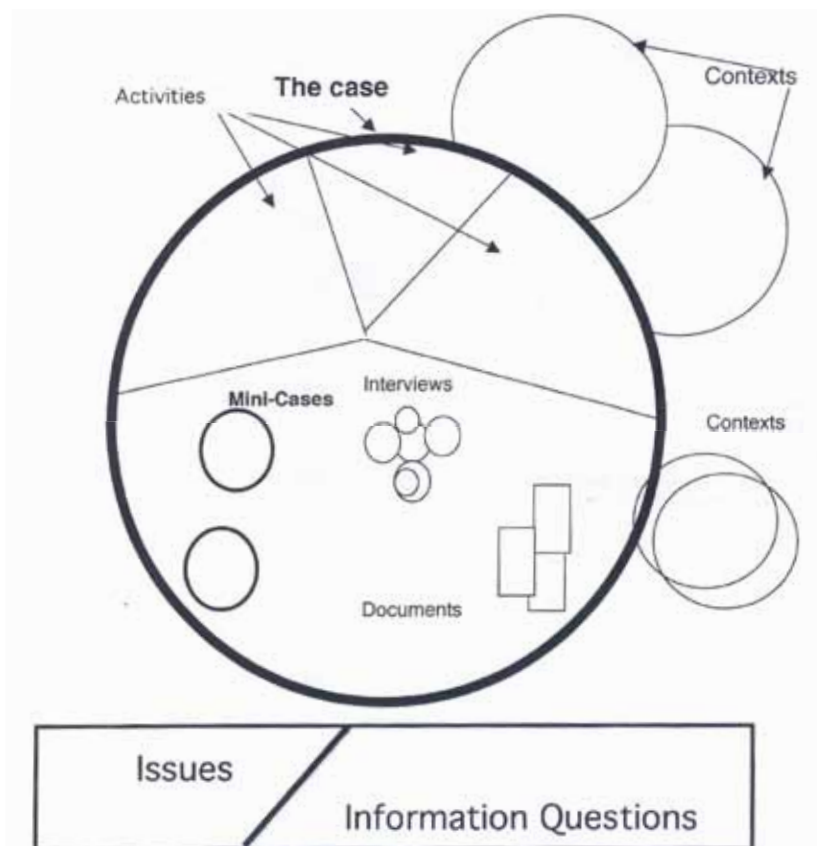
office with a leadership problem could be the case, but the leadership problem is not the case. The office is the case. We design the study to understand the case, hoping also to see better the problem.

A common belief among qualitative researchers is that each situation is unique in some ways. And some of the uniqueness influences, perhaps deep in complexity, the human interaction. So if the researcher fails to dig deeply into the particular situation, the more complex relationships will not be found. Too much concentration on the issue may prevent exploring some complexities (Montoya Vergas, 2008).

Some issues for Joy Conlon's case were: professional relationships between doctors and nurses; the need for pharmaceutical training; child-centered nursing care. Her observations might be too brief. Her interviews might fail to probe. She might fail to learn, for example, influential religious and economic commitments of a nurse giving palliative care.

Method. Let's take a minute to talk about method. Most qualitative researchers emphasize participant observation. Some emphasize interview, especially to learn about the activity they cannot see for themselves. Document review and analysis of dialogue are sometimes essential.

Figure 2. A plan for a case study





In Figure 2, we have a graphic from for the design of a case study. The heavy circle represents the case. The top sectors represent activities or sites of most importance. There may be some minicases to be studied, cases getting only a few pages of the report. Key interviews and documents are planned in advance, but others become needed and the design modifies as the research goes along.

Contexts thought to be most important are represented by semi-circles around the case. One or more issues is anticipated. Some questions are posted to identify key information needed. The design changes with what we call “progressive focusing,” but each of the areas of the design becomes too big to be detailed on the graphic and is further explained elsewhere.

One last matter about qualitative research: causality. Many qualitative researchers are little interested in causality. They design their studies around the co-existence of conditions more than around influences on outcomes. In *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy explained it this way. He said:

Why does an apple fall when it is ripe? Is it brought down by the force of gravity? Is it because its stalk withers? Because it is dried by the sun, because it grows too heavy, or the wind shakes it, or because the boy sanding under the tree wants to eat it? (1869/1978 p 719)

There are many conditions that apparently coexist with and possibly contribute to the apple's fall. The influences change with the weather, and with the boy's appetite. Even a violent windstorm has to share causality with the condition of the stem.

The qualitative researcher uses many pages of description, and others for interpretation. Most of the interpretation is about non-causal relationships that help readers understand human activity as encounters more than as explanations.

To end this writing in the experiential spirit of qualitative research, let us read a vignette from a case study of a sixth grade class in California, taking a field trip (Stake, 1995). The issue is “Are these experiences arranged by the teacher contributing to aesthetic learning? Do the experiences modified by the children sometimes lead to aesthetic maturity?

Nina Bortolio took her children to Luther Burbank House, less than a mile from school. Not far from the orchard and vineyards cultivated by Burbank himself was an old mud-brick house built by one of the area's first settlers. The house stood just beyond the citrus trees at the base of the grand hill to the west, too low for a view of the river.

The sun was beaming warm as a small group of nine-year-olds began their task of making bricks of mud. As perhaps had the early settlers, they gathered at a six-foot-wide shallow pit under a weeping evergreen, dumped a barrow load of black dirt in the pit, added a few inches of water, took off their shoes, rolled up their jeans and began tromping ‘round and’ round to mix adobe, ‘round and’ round in a circle of productivity. Their steps were nicely circumscribed.

Gret Neilsen, a park ranger, took off her shoes and socks and joined the circle of five. In her presence, the work had begun in sobriety but, as boys and girls warmed to the task, as the pit became slippery and as the ranger voiced no warming, the mud climbed higher on legs, and arms as well. The task



moved from work to play. Slipping became more frequent, as did bumping and brushing. 'Round and' round they went, and down and up.

Ranger Neilsen withdrew. A blonde girl's hair suddenly had a tassel of mud. Giggling and haphazard swelled. A boy became mud to his chest. A parent said "Enough!" They hand-scooped the slurry into the forms and patted them flat, still moved by work and play. Then, with little attention to the destiny of their bricks, they moved off to hose away the mud. Gret Neilsen smiled a shy smile and shook her head. The warm sun assured completion of the task.

The researcher's attention goes to studying and reporting context. Most case study researchers believe that the contexts (the situation) influence what the case is doing, so they study contexts. Think of the case is embraceable. We can get our arms around it. It is the study of the here and now, human activity in a particular situation.

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