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# What Makes Qualitative Research Qualitative?

James W. Chesebro & Deborah J. Borisoff

*The discipline of communication is marked by an increasing number of means of understanding. Given the recent research explosion, specialization has accordingly become a major way of dealing with research and methodological diversity. Within this context, this analysis is predominantly definitional, seeking to isolate the unique features of qualitative research. This analysis first provides a survey of six major definitions of and approaches to qualitative research. Second, commonly shared characteristics of qualitative research are outlined, including the role that natural setting plays in the research design, the role of the researcher as both observer and participant, how subjects influence the content of a communication study, the influence of subject intentionality on the research report, and the pragmatic uses of qualitative research. Third, it is suggested that qualitative research is theoretically unique, satisfying the requirements for grounded theory. Finally, it is concluded that qualitative research is increasingly finding its own identity when viewed in terms of the goals and procedures of quantitative and critical approaches to communication.*

*Keywords: Ethnography; Grounded Theory; Qualitative Research*

This special issue of *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication* aptly deals with the question, What makes qualitative research qualitative?. Despite the fact that the Eastern Communication Association already has a journal by this title, the question is entirely appropriate for several reasons.

First, the rich variety of ever-increasing methods within the discipline makes questions of definition more important than ever. At the broadest level, ways of generating knowledge are, at least, divided into three diverse camps: scientific, social

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scientific, or quantitative approaches; critical approaches; and quantitative approaches. In this regard, some rather amazing claims are made about differences among these three basic approaches. For example, while outlining his conception of the method of content analysis employed within a quantitative orientation, Krippendorff (2004) has maintained that qualitative scholars “tend to find themselves in a hermeneutic circle, using known literature to contextualize their readings of a given texts, rearticulating the meanings of those texts in view of the assumed contexts”; “resist being forced into a particular sequence of analytical steps”; “search for multiple interpretations by considering alternative voices”; and “apply criteria other than reliability and validity in accepting research results” (pp. 87–89). Because particular references to specific qualitative studies are not provided as these observations are made, it is difficult to determine the frame of reference guiding Krippendorff’s analysis. However, for a variety of qualitative scholars, these claims would at least be startling as a description of their orientation.

Second, each of the basic approaches to the study of communication has been continually growing in its methodological complexity over time. Criticism constitutes a ready example of the growth in methodological complexity. In 1972, when Scott and Brock originally recognized the existence of diversity in rhetorical criticism, they spoke of the “plurality” in criticism created by three specific perspectives, each of which had two specific approaches or methods: the Traditional (i.e., neo-Aristotelian and historical approaches or methods), Experiential (i.e., eclectic and sociocultural-psychological approaches or methods), and New Rhetorics (i.e., grammatical-semantic and dramatistic approaches or methods) perspectives. Some thirty years later, in her third edition, Foss (2004) identifies ten particular “critical approaches” to rhetorical criticism while excluding approaches such as media and critical/cultural studies criticism. Moreover, the distinctions among “fantasy-theme criticism,” “feminist criticism,” and “ideological criticism” are not always clear, and it is unclear how these critical approaches are and are not distinct from the system of content analysis outline by Krippendorff as quantitative. However, there can be no denying that a marked increase in the number of diverse methods employed has occurred in communication.

Third, complicating matters even more, the language used to distinguish these basic approaches is often diverse, if not apparently contradictory. In this first section of this essay, we survey six of the different labels that have been used to deal with different dimensions and characteristics of qualitative research. We fully recognize that each of these labels deserves attention, and that each begins to reveal an important feature of what can be meant by qualitative research. At the same time, such diverse labels, each with a different set of referents and references, possesses the potential to confuse as much as it might clarify.

### **Thesis and Preview**

Given the current state of research, it is more than appropriate to ask some essential definitional questions about what qualitative research is. In this analysis, we isolate

some of the foundations that might be employed for identifying the province and unique features of qualitative research. We approach this task in four ways:

- First, we survey the diverse labels and definitions that have been used to define qualitative research.
- Second, we isolate five common characteristics that we ultimately think constitute a unifying definition of qualitative research.
- Third, we identify some important kinds of research questions and theoretical issues that define the concerns of qualitative researchers.
- Fourth, we return to our original point of departure in this essay and identify parameters for distinguishing quantitative, critical, and quantitative ways of knowing or basic approaches to understanding human communication.

### **Six Formal Definitions of Qualitative Research**

Of course, one can speculate about why one basic approach to communication research might have so many labels. Certainly, as Lincoln and Denzin (2003) demonstrate in *Turning Points in Qualitative Research*, qualitative research has undergone profound transformations as new philosophical questions have been raised, theoretical orientations have been posited, and methods have been articulated, and as the results of new applications have been integrated into existing philosophies, theories, and methods. For others, such as Wolcott (2005), quantitative research is being fundamentally and formally reconceived as an art rather than science. Finally, for others, such as Saldana (2003), qualitative research has been fundamentally redefined as an enterprise that should be understood in terms of time, and specifically in terms of a longitudinal framework. Any one of these explanations is tempting. We would embrace these perspectives as potentially revealing, but we also think that we have diverse labels for qualitative research because the scholars, researchers, artists, and critics associated with each label actually had a different conception and view in mind when they opted for the label they employed to characterize their endeavors. In each event, at this point, we think each label warrants attention.

#### *Naturalistic Research*

Two dimensions have traditionally been used to define “naturalistic research” (Willems, 1969, p. 46). First, the researcher seeks to make the research experience as much a part of the subjects’ everyday environment as possible. It is a question of degree: the more a research project blends into and is a part of the daily experiences of subjects, the more the research findings are viewed as “naturalistic.” Second, research is viewed as more “naturalistic” if the behavior studied is restricted as little as possible by the researcher or by the design of the research project. In this regard, if a researcher asks you to complete a questionnaire in a classroom and the questionnaire provides you with only a limited number of responses to each question or statement on the questionnaire, the environment and the nature of the questionnaire itself

would suggest the research project is extremely artificial rather than natural. On the other hand, if a researcher is one of your friends and you are unaware that he or she is observing your behaviors for a research project, you might believe your friend has been acting unethical and in a deceptive fashion, but the research project itself would be classified as “naturalistic” because the study was conducted in your everyday environment and the behaviors you displayed were not restricted, in any way, by the researcher or the design of the research project.

### *Qualitative Research*

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) have argued that

Fundamentally, qualitative researchers seek to preserve and analyze the situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations. . . . Unlike naturalistic inquiry, qualitative research is not always carried out in the habitat of cultural members. . . . Unlike ethnography, qualitative research does not always immerse the researcher in the scene for a prolonged period, adopt a holistic view of social practices, or broadly consider their cultural and historical contexts. . . . Most communication scholars, for example, consider *qualitative research* to be the broadest and most inclusive term for these phenomena. (p. 18; also see: Lincoln & Denzin, 2003)

Frey, Botan, and Friedman (1992) have also argued that

Qualitative data take the form of words rather than numbers. Qualitative data are analyzed and presented in the form of case studies, critiques, and sometimes verbal reports. . . . Qualitative data are analyzed most often by rhetorical critics and ethnographers. (p. 7)

### *Interpretative Research or Interpretivist Epistemology*

Hafren (2004) has provided a set of terms for characterizing interpretative research in contrast to terms used to characterize positivist/empirical research. Table 1 provides a summary of these contrasts.

### *Ethnographic Research*

Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1992) have argued that

ethnography is used to study people’s behavior in specific, natural settings. Ethnographers try to capture as fully as possible, and from the research participant’s perspective, the ways that people use symbols within specific contexts. (p. 7, also see Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Clair, 2005).

Within the last ten years, this ethnographic approach has grown in the attention it has commanded, in the various ways it can be expressed, and in some significant differences in intention, design, and execution. Indeed, a variety of new terms have now emerged to characterize these transformations, including concepts such as *auto-ethnology* (Bochner & Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004) and *ethnodrama* (Saldana, 2005). (Often

**Table 1** Interpretative/Phenomenological and Positivist/Empirical Research Revision Checklist

	Interpretative	Positivist/empirical
Key terms	Phenomenology Quality Meaning Process	Data Statistics Positivist Empirical
Thrust of research	Feelings Unstructured interview	Numbers Questionnaire
Methods	Observations	Measurements
Readability	Great fun	With a calculator
Scale of work	Small scale	Lots of people
Ease of research	One person	Team, big computer or secondary data
Fashionability	High among sociologists	Lower generally among experts
Validity	So-so, depends on your topic, but supplements positivist work.	Highly valued and perhaps even over-estimated.
Reliability	Easy to cheat and select data.	Over-estimated if you believe the nature of society is to change.
Perspective	Interactional.	Post-Durkheim and in the British tradition.
Problems to consider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Time factor.</li> <li>● Making notes.</li> <li>● Ethics</li> <li>● Ease with which subjects can manipulate the image they project.</li> <li>● Possibility of becoming involved in criminal or deviant acts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cost of research</li> <li>● Time factor</li> <li>● Possibility of creating 'leading' questions.</li> <li>● Reliability of responses.</li> <li>● Have the correct questions been asked?</li> <li>● Interpreting statistics is a specialized field</li> <li>● People can read too much into results</li> </ul>

*Note.* Some adjustments in this table were made to reduce the complexity of the analysis in the table and reflect the background of the readers of this chapter.

viewed as art-based research, *ethnodrama* is often treated as an area of analysis related to ethnographic research; see Saldana, 2005.) Indeed, for some, ethnography can be understood as “a methodology of the heart” (Pelias, 2004). In all, as Clair (2003, p. xi) has suggested, these new terms reflect “novel forms of expression to speak of cultural experiences,” for every ethnographic analysis can and should reflect a “rich

history replete with both political and aesthetic undertones.” In all, Clair has aptly noted that

Ethnography has metamorphosed over the years so that varying strains of ethnography have developed. These different perspectives may vary with respect to the guiding theory, the style of engagement, or the way the ethnographer expresses the cultural practices under study.

### *Field Research*

Field research is perhaps the most familiar expression used to characterize qualitative research. However, as a commonly used expression, it can possess diverse meanings.

For academics and scholars, field research has some specific associations. As Keyton (2001) has argued,

As the name implies, field experiments are like experiments in terms of researcher control over the manipulation of independent variables and random assignment of participants. However, the research environment is realistic and natural. Participants are not asked to come to a laboratory environment that is used exclusively for experimentation. Rather, the research is conducted in environments with which participants already are familiar. (p. 161)

In this regard, Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1992) have aptly noted, “A *field experiment* is an experiment conducted in a natural setting” (p. 55).

In the vernacular, field research carries other connotations. In everyday use (not literary, cultured, or foreign uses), as reflected in dictionary definitions, the word *field* is not associated with experiments, manipulations of independent variables, or laboratory environments. For example, a “field test” is conducted “in a natural environment” to determine utility and acceptability. “Field work” involves “firsthand observation” and interviewing “subjects in the field” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1981, p. 423). Indeed, the notion of a “field trip” suggests a “visit made by students and usually a teacher” out of the academic or scholarly environment and into a situation that allows for “firsthand observations” of events as they naturally occur (*Webster’s Third New International Dictionary Unabridged and Seven Language Dictionary*, 1986, p. 846). Within this context, several academic and scholarly publications view field studies as “artistic,” an “artistic challenge” to “preserve, convey, and celebrate” the “complexity” of the field “even to the point of messing science up the way humans seem capable of doing” (Wolcott, 2005; see also Van Maanen, 1988).

Finally, we think that field research also underscores specifically the diverse means of the roles of participant and non-participant within the context of a systematic investigation. For example, Douglas (1976) has argued that there are two types of field research: one very consistent with the “academic/scholarly definition” above, and one with the “vernacular definition” above (p. 15). At the same time, Douglas argues that each type employs different data gathering techniques. The “participant field research” approach employs depth-probe field research, investigative reporting, detective work, covert field research, overt journalism and police work, and overt

field research. The “non-participant field research” approach employs discussion (free-flowing), in-depth interviews, and in-depth interviews with flexible checklists of questions.

### *Action or Applied Research*

As Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1992) have argued, action or applied research is “conducted for the purpose of solving a particular ‘real-world,’ socially relevant problem” (pp. 4–5). Action or applied researchers “start with a perceived problem and conduct a study to solve it.”

The forms of qualitative research mentioned immediately above employ distinct approaches. However, they all share certain commonalities.

### **Five Commonly Shared Characteristics of All Forms of Qualitative Research**

While quantitative research can vary tremendously in its dominant theory, mode of expression, and set of procedures, we do think that across the rich diversity of qualitative research studies undertaken, all of these studies tend to share five common characteristics.

1. *Natural setting.* Investigation and data collection are conducted in a geographic location, time, and set of rituals determined, if not controlled, by the subjects. The environment is not and was never intended for the investigation and data collection. Some argue that a simulation of a natural setting can be equivalent to and control symbol-using in the same way that a natural setting does.
2. *Researcher as participant.* The researcher is perceived by the subjects as a participant in some significant way. While the investigator may be known as a researcher, the verbal and nonverbal actions of the investigator are not perceived as stemming from the role of researcher.
3. *Subject-based communication.* The subjects are allowed to identify and determine topics of communication, provide transitions from one topic to another, and provide any qualifiers they see fit. The researcher’s objectives and research questions do not generate and guide the communication topics, transitions, and qualifiers of the subjects.
4. *Subject intentionality.* The researcher seeks to capture and preserve the communication and symbol-using of subjects as the subjects understand and intend them.
5. *Pragmatic.* The specific results obtained have immediate utility and/or produce direct and instant insight into ongoing social processes and outcomes; the research analysis resolves an existing social problem. It may or may not contribute to theory development.

### **Significant and Unique Research Goals, Questions, and Issues Guiding Qualitative Research**

In their work on human communication theory and research, Heath and Bryant (2000) argued that “[t]he word *theory* refers to the process of observing



and speculating” (p. 10). They further explain that “[a] theory is a systematic and plausible set of generalizations that explain some observable phenomena by linking concepts (constructs and variables) in terms of an organizing principle that is internally consistent.” Heath and Bryant’s (2000) notion of theory has important implications for the area of qualitative research. The initial part of their definition includes “process” and appears at first glance to be open to interpretation. The second portion of their definition, however, makes certain assumptions regarding what this process ought to yield. First, it presupposes that full “explanation” is possible. Second, it presupposes that “internal consistency” is inherent in all instances of the phenomena being observed. Third, the term “observable” suggests distance, or being apart, from that which is being observed.

Theory-building has been the abiding *sina qua non* of research. How we get at developing and generating theory, however, has been questioned and transformed.

Within the field of communication as well as other disciplines, quantitative research has been long regarded as the predominant methodology to test and to generate theories. Qualitative research was viewed more as a precursor to rigorous (i.e., quantitative) measures; it was seen as providing primarily impressionistic and unsystematic descriptions that produced mostly case studies with limited value. With the 1967 publication of their path-breaking *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged these assumptions about qualitative research and provided an approach to field research that effectively unseeded the quantitative paradigm as the only legitimate approach to research. In the process, as Charmaz (2000) has suggested, they situated field research as an “endeavor in its own right” (p. 511).

So, what is grounded theory? Essentially, grounded theory suggests that theory emerges inductively from the data—that is, “from the ground up.” This contrasts with the traditional inquiry characteristic of quantitative research which posits a deductive approach (one begins with a theory and then tests or examines it). However, even among grounded research theorists, there are divergent views regarding the process and goal that this type of research ought to produce.

In her chapter on grounded theory, Kathy Charmaz explains how qualitative researchers (including Glaser and Strauss as well as subsequent adherents) came to embrace different approaches regarding the researcher’s role and the goal of grounded theory research. The traditional view follows the “objectivist” perspective (also identified as a “positivist” lens). The more recent perspective has been called the “constructivist” perspective (also identified as an “interpretive” lens). Table 2, “Objectivist and Constructivist Approaches to Qualitative Research,” summarizes some of these differences.

The nuances reflected in Table 2 are profound. However, both approaches share the following six key aspects that guide grounded theory inquiry (see, e.g., Charmaz, 2000). In short-hand, a ground theory possesses several outstanding features:

1. *Applicable and working.* A close relationship should exist between the behaviors observed and how characterizations of these behaviors are intended and understood by subjects.

**Table 2** Objectivist and Constructivist Approaches to Qualitative Research

Distinguishing characteristics	Objectivist/positivist approach	Constructivist/interpretative approach
Conception of and approach to realworld	The real world and the truths it holds are waiting to be discovered.	The world is made real through people's actions and thoughts—it emerges and does not exist in some external and readily discovered form.
Method for analysis	The approach assumes a systematic set of methods that can lead ultimately to discovering truths about reality that will yield testable theories. <i>Truth</i> , in this context, is with a small letter <i>t</i> .	The approach assumes methods that are open to refinement that can illuminate how subjects construct reality; it does not presume a generalizable truth about reality. The aim is to identify the meaning people construct as they interact.
Role of researcher	The researcher's stance is as observer, recorder, and analyst of the data. The researcher stands apart from the research.	The researcher's interactions with subjects contribute to the emerging concepts and categories. The researcher functions as a participant as well as an observer. The data collected are co-constructed by the researchers and subjects studied.
Nature of data	Rich data yield categories, ultimately categories that are privileged over experience.	Data include the feelings and interpretations of what subjects reveal both explicitly as well as tacitly. Ultimately, it is possible that the data may remain at a more intuitive and impressionistic level.
Trustworthiness of the findings	Reliability and validity can be achieved, allowing for the study to be replicated.	Hypotheses and concepts can be generated which other researchers can apply to similar research problems.

2. *Localized*. The interpretation of behaviors reflects the natural environment and everyday social arena in which it was derived.
3. *Patterned*. Common features unifying behaviors from different circumstances or individuals are inductively identified.
4. *Emergent research design*. Because all contexts and individuals studied are unique, the method or procedure for studying a natural field must stem from

and reflect the idiosyncratic nature of the field (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 209).

5. *The design is refined and negotiated.* As new findings and understandings are encountered, the method and procedure employed to study the field are adjusted (e.g., Charmaz, 2000, p. 510; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 211).
6. *Prescribed application.* Because of the specific focus of information derived from a field, actions are intimately linked to the thick description obtained in the data-gathering process.

## Conclusion

Are there any overall observations that are warranted at this time?

Two conclusions are appropriate, one dealing with how qualitative research functions with the broader research agenda of the discipline of communication, and the second dealing with the limitations of this analysis in terms of the broader research agenda of the discipline of communication.

### *Distinguishing Quantitative, Critical, and Qualitative Research as Basic Approaches in the Discipline of Communication*

A wide variety of approaches are used to examine and systematically study human communication. Some prefer to observe what people do, and the conditions under which they act as they do. Within this context, employing surveys and questionnaires, some communication scholars emphasize what people report they have done when communicating. Seeking to provide broad generalizations or theories about human communication over diverse situations, this behavioral orientation is typically identified as a *scientific*, *social scientific*, or *quantitative* approach to communication. Still another group focuses on the values and value judgments that always permeate and undergird all communicative experiences. Frequently, these scholars challenge our assumptions, and they even propose alternative ways of communicating. They goad and encourage us to aspire to more humane and responsible ends as communicators. This approach to the study of communication is predominantly identified as a *critical approach* to communication. In this analysis, we examine yet another way in which to study human communication. We focus on how people communicate in their own natural environments, when they are guided by their own personal objectives, and how they give meaning to their communication, especially when they are using communication for those pragmatic objectives that determine and control day-to-day existence. This approach has had a host of different labels, but its central and most unifying label is *qualitative research*.

### *Limitations of This Analysis in Terms of the Discipline of Communication*

This analysis is intentionally limited conceptually and by the space afforded in this publication. Beyond the considerations we have isolated here, we also think that a

survey of the methods used by qualitative researchers, the particular research agenda of qualitative researchers, as well as the ethical issues that are of particular interest to qualitative researchers but not as clearly within the domain of quantitative and critical scholars can shape, guide, and determine how the word meanings of the *qualitative* reveals and determines the unique features of qualitative research. We are currently planning a more extended essay that will explore these additional issues.

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