

Introduction

The Field

Qualitative research is designed to explore the human elements of a given topic, where specific methods are used to examine how individuals see and experience the world. Although qualitative research is often described in opposition to quantitative research, many scholars and practitioners are now using mixed methods and interdisciplinary approaches in their projects. Understanding the goals, intentions, and implications of these different research paradigms is vital to developing and assessing appropriate research designs. Qualitative methods are best for addressing many of the *why* questions that researchers have in mind when they develop their projects. Where quantitative approaches are appropriate for examining *who* has engaged in a behavior or *what* has happened and while experiments can test particular interventions, these techniques are not designed to explain why certain behaviors occur. Qualitative approaches are typically used to explore new phenomena and to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, or interpretations of meaning and process.

Qualitative methods are central to research conducted in education, nursing, sociology, anthropology, information studies, and other disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and health sciences. The range of methods available is very broad (e.g., in-person interviews, observation, diaries and journals) and projects are informed by various methodologies (e.g., phenomenology, discourse analysis) and theoretical frameworks (e.g., feminist epistemology). However, students, scholars, and professionals who are new to qualitative research typically need guidance in defining the boundaries of this type of work, including guidance in selecting specific methods, knowing what types of data are appropriate for qualitative studies, identifying theoretical frameworks for particular projects, and so on. It is important that both

novice and established scholars understand the language, culture, and paradigmatic approaches used in qualitative research, especially as interdisciplinary projects increasingly link researchers across varied fields of study. Researchers and practitioners at all levels, and across disciplines, will benefit from this encyclopedia, as it defines and explains core concepts, describes the techniques involved in the implementation of qualitative methods, and presents an overview of qualitative approaches to research.

Rationale for This Encyclopedia

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods presents current and complete information, as well as ready-to-use techniques, facts, and examples from the field of qualitative research in a very accessible style. The volume is designed to appeal to undergraduate and graduate students, practitioners, researchers, consultants, and consumers of information across the social sciences, humanities, and health sciences. The encyclopedia provides a much more comprehensive examination of qualitative methods than is found in other published texts, as it is designed to appeal to readers across disciplines. In taking an interdisciplinary approach, this encyclopedia targets a much broader audience than other texts; it fills a gap in the existing reference literature for a general, interdisciplinary guide to the core concepts that inform qualitative research practices.

The entries cover every major facet of qualitative methods, including gaining access to research participants, data coding, research ethics, the role of theory in qualitative research, and much more—all without overwhelming the informed reader. Although the range of topics is intended to be comprehensive, each individual entry is designed to provide only an introduction to the topic at hand. Each entry is following by a

list of key readings on the topic. In addition, entries may also contain the first and last names of scholars or mention key works that are not included in the Further Readings. These names and resources provide additional starting points for readers who want to identify additional sources on the material discussed in the entry by searching for these people and materials on the internet or in library collections.

To provide quick access to the diversity of topics in the encyclopedia, a “Reader’s Guide” groups the entries into 16 subject categories: Approaches and Methodologies; Arts-Based Research, Ties to; Associations, Centers, and Institutes; Computer-Assisted Data Analysis; Data Analysis; Data Collection; Dissemination and Writing; History of Qualitative Research; Participants; Quantitative Research, Ties to; Research Design and Planning; Research Ethics; Rigor; Textual Analysis, Ties to; and Theoretical and Philosophical Frameworks.

Content and Organization

There was a concerted effort made in the design of the encyclopedia to cover every topic that informs qualitative research methods practice and development. This is easier said than done! Certainly, a volume like this will never be fully complete, as qualitative methods are in constant evolution—being recrafted and reshaped within and between disciplines. New methods and techniques, new journals, and new software packages are created every year. At the same time, existing approaches are often reframed, particularly as new theoretical frameworks inform thinking on qualitative methods design. The richness and vibrancy of the qualitative paradigm is exciting for researchers and often what draws us to this type of work; and yet, this makes the development of a comprehensive encyclopedia a challenging end goal indeed. We have tried our best to be comprehensive and complete while keeping redundancies to a minimum and while respecting disciplinary differences. Indeed, the political landscape surrounding the value of “scientific” research and the place of qualitative methods within that landscape is a recurring theme in many of the entries. Despite the ubiquitous nature of qualitative methods, for decades, across dozens of disciplines, qualitative methods remain a contested and controversial area of work for many scholars and practitioners. Their voices—and those for whom this area of work is well regarded—ring through this volume.

However, it is also important to note that the language of qualitative methods is difficult to formalize. Whether we refer to a study as using a “discourse analysis” approach, a “meta-analysis” approach, or whether we label it as “content analysis” may be a question of interpretation informed by one’s own disciplinary background and training. Indeed, many of the entries point to substantive debates among qualitative researchers regarding how concepts are labeled and the implications for how qualitative research is valued.

In some cases (as with this discourse analysis example), we have included separate entries on related concepts where we felt that a single entry alone could not represent the nuances of these different, yet connected, terms. In other cases, we have included “see also” references to point readers to a single, preferred term to represent a concept. The authors of the entries have also identified see also terms to point readers to additional, related topics. All of these techniques are designed to guide readers through the complex landscape of the language of qualitative inquiry. However, there may well be a few terms where we have inadvertently omitted a linking term or where we have made a difficult decision in choosing one term over another. The “Reader’s Guide” will therefore serve as an invaluable resource for individuals who need some guidance in locating specific topics.

How the Encyclopedia Was Created

The encyclopedia was developed in six steps:

Step 1: Qualitative methods experts from around the world and representing various disciplines were invited to serve on the editorial board. The board includes individuals who have published widely in the area of qualitative methods and who advise students, practitioners, and faculty members on the use and development of qualitative research approaches. Our Managing Editor, Kristie Saumure, was recruited at this stage to oversee the day-to-day progress of our work.

Step 2: We created a list of terms to be included in the volume, which involved two major phases of work. First, an initial list was crafted by the Editor and Managing Editor, based on a review of published qualitative methods texts, journals specializing in

qualitative methods development, qualitative conference proceedings, and other relevant research literature. Then, this list was circulated to the editorial board for their feedback and suggestions. The board's review identified gaps in the list, as well as areas where the terminology should be updated, refined, or altered to reflect disciplinary differences and preferences. For example, although some qualitative researchers use terms for rigor that reflect a quantitative or experimental paradigm (e.g., validity and reliability), others prefer terminology that is specific to qualitative work (e.g., credibility and dependability). Overall, the design of the encyclopedia has taken the latter approach and reflects an inherently qualitative language. In some cases (as with rigor), entries are included that reflect both ends of this language spectrum; in other cases, readers will find appropriate see also references throughout the text to guide them through this complex landscape of terminology.

Step 3: At this stage, we identified and invited contributors to write entries for the nearly 500 terms that are included in this two-volume set. The editorial board was asked to nominate individuals to serve as authors, and we also searched the published literature, consulted with colleagues, and reviewed individuals' personal websites to identify potential contributors. Our goal was to reflect a range of disciplinary and global voices in these contributions. To that end, the authors hail from various countries and disciplines, and the entries reflect a diverse spectrum of research approaches (from more traditional, positivist approaches through postmodern, constructionist ones).

The contributors include junior scholars and senior experts, as well as individuals working outside of academe in qualitative methods training and consulting. Readers will, no doubt, recognize a number of key figures in this volume, who have shaped qualitative methods work for decades, as well as some up-and-coming names in the field. This richness of perspectives may well introduce some areas of conflict and contradiction between the entries; however, such diversity—like qualitative research itself—is vital to energizing our work and moving methods development forward in the future. The contributors share a passion for qualitative research that is reflected in their writing and in their willingness to write for this encyclopedia. Although some individuals we approached could not participate (often due to illness or time commitments), those who did really

took ownership of the text as a whole, in addition to their individual entries. Many of the contributors volunteered to write on more than one topic, suggested new terminology for certain concepts, or asked us to include additional entries, particularly where they were dabbling with new approaches and techniques. This depth of commitment on the part of our contributors has made the encyclopedia far richer and more comprehensive than it would have been without their caring and concern.

Step 4: Contributors were provided with instructions for the creation of their entries, as well as a few samples to guide their writing and research. In particular, we encouraged them to be as descriptive and comprehensive as possible while writing for the educated, yet unknowing reader. Although we have tried to maintain a degree of similarity in the look and feel of the entries, the authors were also encouraged to find their own voice in these texts and write in a way that suited the content of their contributions. For example, although the publisher's style guidelines encourage the use of the third-person voice for encyclopedia entries, the first-person voice is one that resonates strongly in qualitative research and writing. Readers will note that some authors have chosen to write in the first-person voice (including, most appropriately, the entry on the use of first-person voice), while others have chosen to write in the third-person. Such stylistic differences are purposeful in this volume, so should not be read as inconsistent, per se. Rather, these examples speak to the diversity of approaches that define qualitative work and serve as illustrative markers of the various ways that scholars and practitioners approach qualitative work.

Step 5: The Editor and Managing Editor reviewed all of the entries and asked the authors for revisions, as necessary. At times, we also relied on the expertise of members of the editorial board to ensure a high level of quality and comprehensiveness in the entries included.

Step 6: We finalized the entries, compiled the Reader's Guide, and compiled all supplementary materials (such as this introduction).

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