WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY A "QUALITATIVE" STUDY? AN ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

John M. Dirkx & Benita J. Barnes

Abstract

Current approaches to qualitative research in adult and continuing education reflect widely differing assumptions about what is meant by qualitative. To foster conversation in our field around this question, we conducted an exploratory study of qualitative studies published over a ten-year period in Adult Education Quarterly. Our findings suggest differing understandings of what it means to design, conduct, and report "qualitative research." These understandings reflect the influence of differing paradigms on what qualitative research means and suggest implications for the field and for the training of future researchers.

From the early, pathbreaking studies in sociology and anthropology, qualitative research has spread to other social science disciplines, such as social work, communication, and education (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a). Characterized by several historical moments, the evolution of qualitative research in the social sciences reflects differing epistemological perspectives that stress fundamentally different views of what counts as knowledge and how we come to know. Today, in adult and continuing education qualitative research represents a widely popular approach to scholarly inquiry, particularly among doctoral students. A typical perusal through adult education conference proceedings or mainstream journals in the field will clearly demonstrate its pervasiveness within the scholarship of our field. Within this body of research we encounter many forms of questions, methods of data collection, analytic strategies, and interpretive lenses. With such variation, it is increasingly difficult to fully understand what constitutes the "qualitative" aspect of the research being reported. To help foster reflection on and conversation around this question, we undertook this exploratory study to examine the paradigmatic assumptions reflected in published empirical studies that claim to be qualitative in nature.

Background and Rationale for the Study

Virtually all forms of inquiry and research aim at some form of interpreting an aspect of the world. We seek to explain, understand, or some way make sense of an aspect of that world that has, in one way or another, become problematic. Our motivations for engaging in this process of interpretation vary widely, and the process itself is shaped by a host of presuppositions and assumptions that we bring to the inquiry, including our worldviews, paradigms, perspectives, theories, and beliefs. Collectively, formal and systematic approaches to inquiry and interpretation, such as those reflected in adult education research, reveal a process marked by substantive tensions, and contradictions, arising from sharp differences in these presuppositions and assumptions and in our disciplinary networks. Interpreting the world, it turns out, represents a highly contested act. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in qualitative research. Despite historical moments in which differing epistemological assumptions of qualitative research have been framed, Denzin and Lincoln (1998a) argue that, through this complex historical maze, a "generic" definition emerges that involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). They suggest that this approach is multi-method in focus, making use of several kinds of empirical materials, such as case studies, personal experiences, life stories,

interviews, observations, and a variety of different texts. Despite the various methodological streams that characterize qualitative research, Denzin and Lincoln suggest that these various methods are all interconnected through a common focus on "problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p.3).

This evolution of qualitative research and its emergence as a dominant approach within many areas of social science have led to the development of a new sensibility leading to what Bernstein (1976) refers to as "the restructuring of social and political theory" (p. xiii). Actually, since publication of Bernstein's provocative text, this notion of an emerging sensibility has led others to argue that our current moment, which many characterize as postmodern, represents a way of thinking about inquiry in which there "is doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge" (Richardson, 1991, p. 173). Bernstein (1976) identifies four distinct paradigms of research that seem to characterize western approaches to scholarly inquiry. He suggests that this new sensibility rests with a growing importance of the interpretive and critical perspectives in research. Thus, qualitative research has evolved from early sociological and anthropological studies that emphasized traditional, positivist epistemologies to our current landscape in which any perspective or approach is particularly privileged or able to lay claim to authoritative knowledge.

Given this trajectory, the kinds and perspectives of qualitative research that are available to scholars in adult and continuing education seem to be increasing exponentially (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b). This development has lead to an intellectual environment in which such ideas as mixed method designs (Creswell, 2002) seem to blur the careful and persuasive paradigmatic distinctions made by Bernstein (1976) and others. (Despite Richardson's (1991) suggestion that no particular approach seems privileged in this postmodern environment, so-called "qualitative" research designs, data collection procedures, and methods of analysis reflect lingering but powerful epistemological assumptions indicative of positivist epistemology (Miles & Huberman, (1994).) In this study, we step back from the plethora of studies in adult education that go under the banner of "qualitative" and seek to identify the differing paradigms, perspectives, and assumptions that are reflected in this research.

Methodology

The focus of this exploratory study was on the ways in which qualitative research is represented in peer-reviewed, published accounts of problems within the field of adult and continuing education. For this reason, we selected Adult Education Quarterly as a source of these reports. Each issue of AEQ over the last 10 years was reviewed for reports of empirical studies that claimed to use a qualitative methodology and each of these papers were photocopied for further analysis. In our sample, 35 papers were included. Qualitative content analysis was used to review each article for 1) purpose of the study; 2) interpretive theory or theories used; 3) research questions being investigated; 4) research design or qualitative tradition used; 5) data collection methods; and 6) data analysis. Data across these categories were then analyzed in terms of the paradigmatic perspectives or assumptions reflected in the report.

Summary of Findings

Our findings are organized around (a), the methodological perspectives used in the study; (b) the epistemological focus of the study; (c) data collection procedures, and (d) methods for reducing and analyzing the data.

Methodological Perspective Framing the Study

Since the rapid rise of qualitative approaches in adult education research, scholars have attempted to make sense of the proliferation of methods associated with these approaches (Creswell, 1998 ; Merriam, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998c). The particular perspective adopted is important to consider because the perspective provides, in part, the basis for framing the study, the particular kinds of purposes or questions pursued in the research, and the unit of analysis. The authors of the studies we examined use numerous terms to describe their perspectives. Examples include: ethnography, critical ethnography, cross cultural ethnography, life history, Black feminist, phenomenography, phenomenological, grounded theory, interpretivist, multi-case study, and naturalistic inquiry. In some instances, brief descriptions or definitions of these perspectives are provided but, in other cases, it is difficult to determine what the authors mean by the label. No one particular perspective dominates the studies we reviewed.

Epistemological Focus of Research Questions

By epistemological focus, we refer to implicit assumptions about the nature of knowledge reflected in the purpose of the study or the research questions posed. The studies we reviewed reflected several different foci: (a) description, (b) understanding/interpretation; (c) explanation or causal relationships. Studies with a descriptive focus provide little more than a detailed description of a phenomenon of interest. With careful attention to factual characteristics, these studies often resemble articles that might appear in a local newspaper. Examples include: benefits from participation in ACE programs; and perspectives developed from portfolio development. In these instances, what participants say or what was observed are simply reported and described, sometimes in broad categories that group large instances of observations together.

Numerous studies suggested a focus on understanding or interpreting the phenomenon of interest. Examples of these include: how knowledge becomes meaningful across professions; how cultural values shape learning in Malaysia; and adult learning in African villages. In these studies, researchers approach a given social or cultural setting with an intent to both describe what is happening within the setting and also to provide a sense of the underlying meaning that structures what it is that is observed. Unlike purely descriptive studies, which rarely rise above an accounting of what was observed, studies that aim on understanding or interpreting a phenomenon of interest seek to reveal the meaning, through the words or actions observed, that guides their research participants.

Another common epistemological focus we observed in the studies reviewed reflects an interest in relationships among different aspects of the phenomenal world. Examples included: how the societal positions of African American women affects their experiences in the teaching of postsecondary math; explanation of factors that encourage and discourage participation of black women; why rural adults do not participate in Guatemalan literacy programs; and environmental inhibitors in informal workplace learning. In this focus, researchers are using qualitative methods to seek explanation or causation among variables of interest. Of importance to note in this category is the presence a priori of a perspective on the phenomenon of interest that resembles a model, theory, or hypotheses. Data are collected on the variables specified by this perspective and then qualitatively analyzed in terms of their relationship with one another.

Data Collection Procedures

Qualitative methodology has evolved numerous methods for data collection (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b), depending on the particular perspective being used. We observed at least eight different forms of data collection reported in the studies we reviewed. Data collection methods often reflected inductive approaches but coding procedures using a prior frameworks and models to guide data collection were also observed. By far, however, the most common data collection procedure used in the published reports was the individual interview, reflecting the broader trend in the qualitative research community (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b, p. 36). Researchers reported several different approaches, including informal, formal, open-ended, follow-up, unstructured, semi-structured, indepth, and life history. Reported length of interview time ranged from less than an hour to three or more hours, although typical durations reported fell around 60 to 90 minutes. A few studies reported the use of one or more follow-up interviews.

In addition to individual interviews, the use of focus groups were reported in a few studies, but the particular use of this methodology was not always clearly described. In most instances, this procedure seems to refer to getting together with a group of research participants, talking with them and asking questions about the phenomenon of interest. Beyond this general description, it is difficult to provide a more detailed understanding of this particular strategy.
Several studies reported the use of observation of a social setting associated with the phenomenon of interest. These settings included classrooms, the setting in which formal interviews were conducted, and "personal" context. Observations were usually conducted in association with individual interviews conducted either in association with observations or more formally arranged. The use of "participation" and "field notes" were also sometimes included as descriptions of data collection but we were not clear to what these referred. In addition to observations, a few researchers reported the use of documents, participant journals, and researcher journals. Documents included brochures, text lessons, training materials, and photographs. In a couple studies, the nature of documents used was unspecified. .

Methods of Data Reduction and Analysis

Although numerous scholars have offered detailed descriptions of specific processes to use in reducing mounds of text from interviews, observations, and documents (Glaser & Struss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1998, 1994; Spradley, 1980), rarely do such specific descriptions show up in published reports of research. Researchers usually make general reference to terms that stand in for these particular and specific procedures. In the reviewed reports, many terms were used to describe data analysis, including: categorical analysis; constant comparative method; concept mapping; case analysis; domain, taxonomic, componential analyses; open and axial coding; holistic analysis, interview questions used as codes; inductive analysis; and discovery oriented analysis with sequential analysis. In many instances, the particular method of analysis was simply not clear.

Another area of qualitative research that has been the subject of considerable discussion is the role of theory in guiding and informing data analysis, what Denzin (1998) refers to as "interpretive style" (p. 326). These studies varied with respect to the role that interpretive theories, such as critical race theory, poststructural theory, or feminist theory, played in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data. In many studies, theories being used to guide and interpret data were not explicitly articulated.

Discussion and Conclusion

Denzin and Lincoln (1998c) suggest that major paradigms and perspectives "now structure and organize qualitative research" (p. 185). These paradigms and perspectives reflect their own

criteria, assumptions and methods that are applicable for disciplined inquiry with their particular frameworks. They argue that qualitative research reflects the paradigmatic influences of positivism (or postpositivism), constructivism, critical theory, and interpretive perspectives. These different approaches reflect fundamentally differing assumptions of ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In other words, they suggest that it matters how qualitative research is framed and understood. Such meanings are largely derived from the particular paradigms in which the study is conceptualized.

Our findings reflect the influence of multiple paradigms and perspectives on the qualitative research that is being conducted and reported in our field. No one or two views of qualitative research emerge from these studies and it seems difficult to even discern a "generic" understanding of what makes them all qualitative. Many researchers and practitioners assume that, through qualitative methods, research participants or contexts speak for themselves. That is, they construct or reveal the meaning structures that implicitly guide their understandings or actions within the particular settings or phenomenon of interest. These meanings are reflected in the researchers' findings that are thought to be inductively derived from the data. This viewpoint characterizes a constructivist perspective to interpretation and is reflected in many of the studies we analyzed.

Yet, the findings of this study suggest that such a view of qualitative research is not fully consistent with what is actually being practiced and represented in the published literature. Most troubling of these findings, however, is what we would refer to as a post-positivist tendency within qualitative research, and the apparent lack of disciplinary guidance in the interpretation of the data. While we would argue that there is nothing inherently wrong with framing a qualitative study as post-positivist, we take objection to the lack of explicit attention in many of these studies to this question of paradigm, and the potentially conflicting assumptions that are reflected in their overall design and methodology. This tendency, reflected in the questions being asked and methods used to collect and analyze data, is illustrated when researchers look or code for particular structures of meaning in the data, based on a prior notions of what they think might be going on. In the absence of traditional conventions that help define accepted empirical-analytic methods of research, it is not clear how we judge the trustworthiness of qualitative studies that make use of a post-positivist paradigm, and the degree to which we can reasonably depend on these findings as reasonable and helpful representations of a lived reality.

In our current climate, it is not uncommon to see multiple rationales provided for the use of qualitative research, with no clear sense of the underlying theory of knowledge that is guiding the work. Qualitative research is now often cited as a way of generating theories that can be tested with more robust and powerful quantitative, statistical techniques. Others make use of so-called indepth interviews to collect information from a small number of individuals, but then proceed to code the interviews with a priori conceptual schemes or models, often derived from or reflecting questions in the interview protocols.

Space prohibits a more detailed exploration of these issues but our findings raise important questions for how we are preparing and training researchers to design and conduct qualitative studies. In these preparation programs, more attention need to be given to the epistemological framing of the phenomenon of interest and to the influence of particular disciplines on the ways in which we use these frameworks in our research. In addition, attention needs to be given to methods of data analysis and interpretation that can potentially contribute in meaningful ways to our evolving understanding and knowledge of these phenomena.

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John M. Dirkx, Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, Michigan State University
dirkx@msu.edu.

Benita J. Barnes, Executive Coordinator, President, & CEO - National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) and doctoral candidate in Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, barnesbe@msu.edu.