Publishing Qualitative Research

Mary Lee Smith
Arizona State University

This paper constitutes a slight departure from editorial policy for *AERJ*. Far from contributing to general knowledge through empirical analysis, the paper is meant to serve a self-referent and practical purpose. It is meant to signify to the discipline that manuscripts based on qualitative research are being welcomed by *AERJ* editors. It is also meant to assist the editors in recognizing instances of qualitative research and choosing those manuscripts with the greatest relevance and scholarly merit. The author was asked to define qualitative research in education, describe what form an *AERJ* article based on qualitative research might take, and state some criteria that can be used by the editors and referees to judge the merit of such studies.

Seemingly straightforward, the task could hardly be more daunting. The body of work labeled qualitative is richly variegated and its theories of method diverse to the point of disorderliness. Qualitative research is vexed by the problem of different labels. One sees terms such as naturalistic research, participant observation, case study, and ethnography, as well as qualitative research, used interchangeably. If the terms and the work described can be distinguished, it would be a task that requires a separate paper, and, for the present purposes, I will treat them as a package. In addition to the diversity of labels, the field has grown out of diverse disciplines (anthropology, sociology, psychology). Qualitative research is further divided by differing views of the nature of reality (whether there is a world of social objects and forces separate from the observer's perception of them), of object fields judged to be appropriate for study (from whole institutions or communities to brief encounters), of beliefs about the merits of different research methods and ways of representing findings, and of criteria for judging studies. These divisions have created socially bounded territories, acrimonious exchanges among adherents, and institutionalized schools of thought. How then should the editors judge and select manuscripts when such different ways of thinking about and doing qualitative

research exist? It is my contention that *AERJ* must welcome all approaches, recognize the purpose and background of the particular study, find appropriate referees, and employ criteria relevant to the particular approach to qualitative research used.

Qualitative research defies simple description. Those who have attempted to simplify have done so by exclusion. For example, it has been argued that only real anthropological ethnography counts and other forms of qualitative research are inconsequential, or that structural functionalism is "positivist" and therefore outside the category. Such definition by exclusion not only rules out informative research (e.g., Willis, 1981) but also creates theoretical confusion. Smith (1983), for example, equated qualitative with interpretive, then argued that procedures used to verify conclusions were incompatible with the epistemology of interpretive or hermeneutic research. Despite Phillips's (1983) helpful analysis of the concept of positivism, authors continue to label anyone who is not phenomenological with the epithet of positivist. As Stryker (1980), Kirk and Miller (1986), and Campbell and his colleagues (e.g., Brewer & Collins, 1981) have noted, many intermediate philosophical positions are possible. Moreover, many extant qualitative studies seem to be at least implicitly grounded in them. The editors of *AERJ* ought not to give in to the assertion that qualitative research is equivalent to any single approach within it.

This paper has two parts. In the first, I attempt to describe the common features of what is called qualitative research. It is not my intent, in so doing, to suggest a rapprochement among approaches or encourage an unlikely consensus, but to show that the category is more than an empty label. The second section describes four different approaches to qualitative research.

What Is Qualitative Research in Education?

First, qualitative research is empirical. The researcher collects sense data about the phenomenon under study and works on them in some way—organizes them, and hold them up against ideas, hypotheses, and categorical definitions as a way of testing them. In some approaches, one says that abstractions emerge from the data; in others, that a language is chosen and imposed on the data. In some approaches, the primary data are *emic* (i.e., expressed in the categories and meanings of the subject or "native"). Other approaches involve *etic* data (i.e., data expressed in the researcher's language or the categories of some theory).

Qualitative researchers study qualities or entities and seek to understand them in a particular context. As Dabbs (1982) wrote, "Quality is the essential character or nature of something; quantity is the amount. Quality is the what; quantity is the how much. Qualitative refers to the meaning . . . while quantitative assumes the meaning and refers to a measure of it"

(p. 32). Though it focuses on definitions, meanings, and descriptions, refining and placing them in context, and frequently portraying them in words rather than numbers, qualitative is not antiquantitative.

Qualitative research is based on the notion of context sensitivity. What sets qualitative research apart most clearly from other forms of research is the belief that the particular physical, historical, material, and social environment in which people find themselves has a great bearing on what they think and how they act. Acts must be interpreted by drawing on those larger contexts. Qualitative researchers reject the notion of universal, context-free generalization. Learning to solve word problems in arithmetic, for example, is not something that occurs in isolated, antiseptic, laboratory-like settings; rather, it takes place in contexts of human and institutional purposes, prior learning and teaching, and the presence of others; it is facilitated or inhibited by material and physical resources; it involves personal and interpersonal histories, and the like.

Other characteristics of qualitative research follow from the conviction that human acts are context-sensitive. Most importantly, the researcher must personally become situated in the subject's natural setting and study, firsthand and over a prolonged time, the object of interest and the various contextual features that influence it. This introduces notions about the "personhood" of the qualitative researcher and what roles and relationships are formed between researcher and subject. Unlike the model experimenter, the qualitative researcher is not a faceless replicate. Objectivity in the conventional sense is an illusion; the subject's intentions, beliefs, views of the researcher, and interests must be considered. A further implication of the belief in context sensitivity is a deemphasis of standardized or general research methods. The social scene is thought to be so complex that one cannot anticipate it sufficiently to select a priori a single or even a few meanings for a construct (as one does in operationalization) and adopt a uniform way of measuring it. Standardized methods have little utility, and because preordinant procedures are not used, establishing such things as interobserver agreement and representative sampling become problematic and, in some approaches, irrelevant. Methods are not viewed as guarantors of truth, as they seem to be in the orthodox, textbook model of experimentation. Rather, methods are used inventively and tailored to the situation. In many cases, multiple methods are employed, and the findings of alternative methods are played off against each other. In addition, descriptions of methods used are frequently accompanied by justification of the methods chosen, their underlying assumptions, and their limitations. Because there is no catalog of qualitative designs or certified methods, thoughtful researchers describe what they did in detail. Qualitative research is marked by self-examination and criticism of the roles established, of the methods used, and of mistakes made.

Here the resemblance among schools of qualitative research ends. The following section describes several approaches or divisions within the field. This subdivision is meant to be not an exact taxonomy but a heuristic device to inform *AERJ* editors of the range of possibilities they are likely to encounter.

Interpretive Approach

Erickson's (1986) chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* illustrates well the interpretive approach to qualitative research. Indeed, Erickson equates qualitative with interpretive, thereby excluding by implication approaches that use interpretations as points of departure for explanations of the social world based on conflict or structural-functional theories, for example. For interpretive approaches, the object field to be studied is the acts and meanings ascribed to events by actors in a particular social context. Acts are distinguished from behaviors in that, while behaviors are overt and may be objectively observed and counted, acts imply purposeful constructions on the part of an actor that can be understood only from the actor's point of view. Acts are social in that the events of classroom life acquire significance in the immediate and particular setting and are "worked out" together by the teacher, pupils, and others. In other words, the causal dynamics of social life are the reciprocal actions taken by others within the immediate social environment. As described by Erickson (1986), fieldwork based on the interpretive approach "involves being unusually thorough and reflective in noticing and describing everyday events in the field setting, and in attempting to identify the significance of actions in the events from the various points of view of the actors themselves" (p. 121). The qualitative researcher attempts to understand the question

> How are the happenings organized in patterns of social organization and learned principles for the conduct of everyday life—how, in other words, are people in the immediate setting consistently present to each other as environments for one another's meaningful actions? (p. 121)

Having understood these local rules for relating and symbolizing, the researcher interprets them in light of what is happening in wider social contexts and comparative settings.

The interpretive approach embraces a type of philosophical idealism in believing that the mind creates reality and that an objective world separate from the perceptions of the person cannot be known. Social knowledge is gained by *Verstehen*, or subjective, participative understanding and cannot be verified by appeal to external criteria. There are no universal laws to search for; instead, the goal is to understand particular actions and meanings in particular contexts. Data are primarily emic.

Erickson (1986) described what a report based on qualitative research

would contain: empirical assertions; narrative vignettes; quotations from observational field notes and interviews, maps, tables, or figures; interpretive commentary; theoretical discussion; and a description of the research process itself. Empirical assertions are statements of findings derived inductively from a review of field notes and a systematic search for confirming and disconfirming evidence on the assertions ("establishing the evidentiary warrant," p. 146). Vignettes and quotes provide vivid "documentary evidence that what the assertion claimed to have happened did occur at least once. General description ... provides evidence for the relative frequency of occurrence of a given phenomenon .... [and] display[s] the breadth of evidence" (p. 149). Interpretive commentary tells what the portrayals and general descriptions mean from the author's perspective. These elements of the report

> allow the reader to experience vicariously the setting that is described, and to confront instances of key assertions and analytic constructs .... to survey the full range of evidence on which the author's interpretive analysis is based .... and to consider the theoretical and personal grounds of the author's perspective as it changed during the course of the study. (p. 145)

Erickson also identified some problems of fieldwork that journal editors might use as indicators of the scholarly merit of qualitative research based on the interpretive approach. These include inadequate negotiation of entry into the field setting, limiting the researcher's access to relevant data (p. 141), inadequate amount of data, inadequate variety of data sources, faulty interpretive status of evidence, inadequate disconfirming evidence, and inadequate discrepant case analysis (p. 140).

For examples of the interpretive approach, see Hood, McDermott, and Cole (1980) and Erickson (1975).

Related approaches. Work falling under a variety of labels (e.g., ethnomethodology, constitutive ethnography, ethnosemantics, cognitive anthropology) shares with the interpretive approach an emphasis on the contents of the mind, how they are organized, and how they interact with features of the cultural and social situation. Most notable for education is the research on "working intelligence" or "everyday cognition" (Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Researchers study cognitive activities such as remembering, categorizing, and solving problems. They observe such activities in different contexts, for example, in formal learning situations versus in shopping or in the pursuit of a hobby. Besides observation, the researchers rely on formal elicitation procedures to reveal systematically the meaning of mental concepts and how they are organized and used. They also conduct formal tests of hypotheses about the influence of context (the purpose and nature of the activity, the intellectual requirements of performing the task, the guidance provided by experienced adults, peer interaction, and the

like) on language and conceptual performance. Research by Scribner (1984) and Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1984) is illustrative.

Artistic Approaches

The artistic approach departs most obviously from familiar formats in scholarly journals. Rather than empirical assertions supported by description, the report is an artistic rendering, usually a narrative account, of what the researcher has discovered in the case studied. In research, the investigator seeks to experience directly the qualities inherent in the setting, appreciate the meanings held by the people there, and then represent these discoveries so that the reader can have a vicarious experience of the case. Nisbet (1976) recalled "Weber's insistence upon the primacy of . . . Verstehen, of understanding that penetrated to the realm of feeling, motivation, and spirit" (p. 12), understanding that is rooted in intuition and based on experience and observation.

There is little to distinguish the data collection or field relations of the artistic from other qualitative researchers, except that one assumes a person with acute sensitivities who can appreciate and convey the unique qualities of the case. The object fields are more likely to be "the experience the individuals are having and the meaning their actions have for others" (Eisner, 1981, p. 6) than they are observable behaviors or social facts. The sequence of activities followed is usually inductive. Systematic forms of data analysis or verification are not prominent. Instead, the researcher intuitively seeks out themes that will depict experience and meaning in a vivid and significant way.

There is no standard form for presenting results. According to Eisner (1981), "What one seeks is not the creation of a code that abides to publicly codified rules, but the creation of an evocative form whose meaning is embedded in the shape of what is expressed" (p. 6). The researcher preserves, in a coherent account, the concrete details of everyday life. He or she uses elements of storytelling, such as dramatic structure, interpretive ordering of events, narrative voice, and generative metaphors. According to House (1980), these elements "are distinguished from logical entities in that aesthetic elements are apprehended immediately without recourse to formal arguments" (p. 105) and assimilated into the reader's system of tacit meanings. The storytelling form is best illustrated by Brauner (1974) and in the works of Rob Walker and students of Eisner and Stake.

How can editorial decisions be made about reports such as these? Rein (1978, p. 77) suggested these criteria. First, the story should be true. Second, the story should be the simplest internally consistent account that can be offered. It should emphasize those qualities of the situation that can be translated to broader contexts. Finally, there should be minimal distortion by the ideology of the storyteller, who should have subjected his or her

values and work to scrutiny. Donmoyer (1985) wrote that, because the primary aim of artistic researchers is to explicate meaning rather than to establish truth, their work should be afforded considerably more latitude than that of other researchers. According to Eisner (1981):

> Validity in the arts is the product of the persuasiveness of a personal vision; its utility is determined by the extent to which it informs. . . . What one seeks is illumination and penetration. The proof of the pudding is the way in which it shapes our conception of the world or some aspect of it. (p. 6)

Without standardized criteria, in other words, the editors must rely on the completeness, coherence, and internal consistency of the account; whether it penetrated and illuminated the subject; its plausibility; and the credibility of the author.

Systematic Approaches

In sharp contrast to the approaches so far described, some qualitative research might best be described as systematic (although the label might not be accepted). Those who practice and advocate this approach seem to base their arguments on a need for greater credibility and accessibility of their findings. They assume that more systematic and better described methods of data collection and analysis will achieve this end and in addition will improve the teaching of methods (Miles & Huberman, 1984b). Methodologists like LeCompte and Goetz (1982) recommend that qualitative researchers adopt criteria such as reliability and validity to judge their work, thereby enhancing its contribution to the general scientific enterprise. Likewise, Kirk and Miller (1986) identify qualitative research with scientific purposes and name objectivity as a canon of all forms of research.

Analysis of the arguments of these and others reveals a purpose different from, say, the interpretive approach. They propose not only to discover but also to verify. LeCompte and Goetz's remarks are illustrative: "Although ethnographers customarily depend on generative and inductive strategies in the early phases of a research study, they direct later stages of the interactive collection-analysis process to deductive verification of findings" (1982, p. 34). A realist or critical-realist epistemology is revealed in statements such as this by Kirk and Miller: "There is a world of reality out there. The way we perceive it is largely up to us, but the world does not tolerate all understandings of it equally" (1986, p. 11). However, they deny the "positivist" view that "the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or circumstances of viewing" (p. 14). In this, as well as their call for triangulation and replication, their view of knowledge is revealed, although none of the authors mentioned here believe that finding an absolute or universal truth is the goal of research. All acknowledge the

complexity of contexts and the limitations of research methods to deal with them.

If one were to shadow an interpretivist and a systematic qualitative researcher in their interactions with the field setting and collection of data, one would not necessarily observe a difference. Nothing in principle would prevent a systematic researcher from focusing on emic data; therefore, their respective object fields are not necessarily different. One sees the distinctions most clearly in their purposes, assumptions about the nature of reality, and the manner in which they analyze data and represent their evidence and methods.

The form of the report of a systematic qualitative study is likely to be discursive, that is, with conclusions logically argued from empirical evidence. Descriptive data from field notes and interviews will be liberally used but will have been systematically selected to illustrate the process the researcher used to move from evidence to conclusion. This is in contrast to the way the artistic researcher selects data, that is, intuitively or rhetorically to influence the imagery of the reader. The report is structured so that one can judge its scientific credibility. That is, the researcher will attempt to show how the study is objective, reliable, and valid. According to LeCompte and Goetz (1982), the external reliability, or replicability, of a study can be affected by the role taken and relationships formed by the researcher (consequently the data to which the researcher has access), informant choices, social situations and conditions (what informants are willing to reveal in the presence of others or in alternative social contexts), the major analytic constructs employed by the researcher, and the methods used to collect data. Variation in any of these areas will reduce the chance that one ethnographer will reach the same conclusions as another. The correction for this consists not of an operational technique (e.g., high interobserver reliability) but of the researcher's "recognizing and handling" these five problems. By this is meant that the researcher fully discloses his or her role, methods, and constructs. Although there is no complete cure for problems of internal reliability—"whether, within a single study, multiple observers will agree" (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 41)—LeCompte and Goetz recommend certain procedures to enhance it, such as using low-inference descriptors, multiple researchers, local informants who may examine and verify the researcher's account, or mechanically recorded data. Kirk and Miller (1986) echo these notions about reliability, calling for the researcher to detail the "relevant context of observation" (p. 52), including a thorough description and criticism of the author's personal traits, interests, theories, and methods. They advocate in addition routinized, legible, public field notes so that subsequent analysts may follow the researcher's logic and procedures.

A correspondence theory of validity seems to be held by systematic

qualitative researchers, as they not only call for checks on internal coherence and consistency (e.g., searching the data record for discrepant cases or disconfirming evidence) but also appeal to external verification. According to LeCompte and Goetz, "validity necessitates demonstration that the propositions generated, refined, or tested match the causal conditions which obtain in real life" (1982, p. 43). They name threats to internal and external validity of qualitative research that are analogous to those for experimental research. Unlike in the latter, however, threats to the validity of qualitative research are addressed by descriptions and logical analyses rather than by techniques like random assignment.

In addition to their offering a set of routinized procedures for analyzing qualitative data, Miles and Huberman (1984a, 1984b) suggested some techniques a researcher could use to verify propositions and enhance validity. These include

> checking for representativeness . . . . checking for researcher effects . . . . triangulating across data sources and methods . . . . weighting the evidence or deciding which kinds of data are most trustworthy . . . . making contrasts/comparisons, checking the meaning of outliers, and using extreme cases . . . . ruling out spurious relationships; replicating a finding in another part of the data, or a new data source or set; checking out rival explanations . . . . getting feedback from informants . . . . using an audit trail. (1984a, p. 28)

The analysis and report of the systematic qualitative research will highlight these features. The researcher would probably wish his or her manuscript to be assessed according to how well it demonstrated them.

Theory-Driven Approaches

Although their adherents would be uncomfortable lumped in the same category, conflict theories and structural-functional theories are two of several social theories used by qualitative researchers to explain social life. Researchers in this category establish field relations, collect data, respect the context as an influence on human behavior, and strive to understand the meanings of the people they encounter. Unlike the interpretivists, however, they use the meanings of actors as a point of departure. They explain meanings and acts from a deterministic framework of more basic and supraindividual social structures and forces. Thus, a conflict theorist sees schools as both representing and reproducing the existing class and economic divisions in the society as a whole. The researcher operating from this framework will choose topics for study and focus the analysis of data around these themes, showing how the underlying social forces are worked out in the particular contexts studied. Structural functionalism, in contrast, views schools as one component in a cohesive system of interlocking parts. The researcher identifies how the schools function with

respect to the larger system and identifies dysfunctional aspects. In addition, researchers may view schools as smaller social systems that themselves have connecting substructures, each functioning to maintain the integrity of the school and contributing to the achievement of common goals. Because these approaches are deterministic, standards of reliability and validity, outlined above, may be applied. Illustrative works are Willis (1981) and Wolcott (1977).

Conclusion

The policy of the *AERJ* editors to encourage the submission of qualitative research will be welcomed by qualitative researchers of all types. Such a policy can only mean that editors will use different criteria to judge and select such studies from those they use for experiments and surveys. Editors should also understand that different ideologies exist within the discipline of qualitative research. To send a manuscript submitted by an interpretivist to a systematist (or vice versa) is more likely to provoke unresolvable methodological debate than meaningful criticism or fair editorial recommendations. The editors must become ethnographers of the culture of qualitative research. Then reviews can be fairly solicited and properly understood.

References

Brauner, C. J. (1974). The first probe. In D. Sjogren (Ed.), *Four evaluation examples* (pp. 77–98). Chicago: Rand McNally.

Brewer, M. B., & Collins, B. E. (1981). *Scientific inquiry and the social sciences.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dabbs, J. M., Jr. (1982). Making things visible. In J. Van Maanen, J. M. Dabbs, Jr., & R. F. Faulkner (Eds.), *Varieties of qualitative research* (pp. 31–66). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Donmoyer, R. (1985). The rescue from relativism: Two failed attempts and an alternative strategy. *Educational Researcher, 14*(10), 13–20.

Eisner, E. (1981). On the differences between scientific and artistic approaches to qualitative research. *Educational Researcher, 10*(4), 5–9.

Erickson, F. (1975). Gatekeeping and the melting pot: Interaction in counseling encounters. *Harvard Educational Review, 45,* 44–70.

Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative methods in research on teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 119–161). New York: Macmillan.

Hood, L., McDermott, R. P., & Cole, M. (1980). "Let's try to make it a good day": Some not so simple ways. *Discourse Processes, 3,* 155–168.

House, E. R. (1980). *Evaluating with validity.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Kirk, J., & Miller, M. L. (1986). *Reliability and validity in qualitative research.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

LeCompte, M. D., & Goetz, J. P. (1982). Problems of reliability and validity in ethnographic research. *Review of Educational Research, 52,* 31–60.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984a). Drawing valid meaning from qualitative data: Towards a shared craft. *Educational Researcher, 13*(5), 20–30.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984b). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Newman, D., Griffin, P., & Cole, M. (1984). Social constraints in laboratory and classroom tasks. In B. Rogoff & J. Lave (Eds.), *Everyday cognition* (pp. 172–193). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nisbet, R. (1976). *Sociology as an art form.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Phillips, D. C. (1983). After the wake: Postpositivistic educational thought. *Educational Researcher, 12*(5), 4–12.

Rein, M. (1978). *Social science and public policy.* New York: Penguin Books.

Rogoff, B., & Lave, J. (1984). *Everyday cognition.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Scribner, S. (1984). Studying working intelligence. In B. Rogoff & J. Lave (Eds.), *Everyday cognition* (pp. 9–40). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Smith, J. K. (1983). Quantitative versus qualitative research: An attempt to clarify the issue. *Educational Researcher, 12*(3), 6–13.

Stryker, S. (1980). *Symbolic interactionism.* Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin-Cummings.

Willis, P. (1981). *Learning to labor: How working class kids get working class jobs.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (1977). *Teachers versus technocrats.* Eugene, OR: Center for Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon.

Author

MARY LEE SMITH, Professor, College of Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ 85287. *Specializations:* research and evaluation methodology, qualitative approaches.