THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
[F]or the most part qualitative research focuses on how people make sense of their settings and experiences through symbols, social roles, identities, and other elements of culture and why people think and act as they do. The emphasis in qualitative research is on individuals’ own interpretations of their experiences and studying what they say and do in detail.

From the works of anthropologists and sociologists

Many years prior to the conception of the term “qualitative research”, anthropologists and sociologists immersed themselves in various settings—in remote place villages of Africa or in city in the United States—observing events, interviewing people, and collecting and analyzing artifacts, personal and public documents relevant to understanding what they were studying.

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**CHICAGO SCHOOL** (1920s-30s)

Chicago School sociologists doing life histories produced works that emphasized the importance of seeing the world from the perspective of those who were seldom listened to—the criminal, the vagrant, the immigrant. While not using the phrase, they knew they were “giving voice” to points of view of people marginalized in the society.

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Mid-twentieth-century publications

1967: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss

- The book made a case for building theory from inductively analyzing a social phenomenon instead of testing a theory

1978: *Toward a Methodology of Naturalistic Inquiry in Educational Evaluation* by Egon Guba

- A “naturalistic” study takes place in a real-world setting rather than in a laboratory, and whatever is being observed and studied is allowed to happen “naturally”

- A discovery-oriented research is one in which the findings are not predetermined

Late 1970s and early 1980s

- Researchers in the fields of education, health, administration, social work, and so on, began to adopt qualitative methods.
- Discipline-specific journals began publishing qualitative studies, and several journals devoted to qualitative research were established.

Today

- There are hundreds of books on qualitative research, as well as journals and regularly held conferences devoted to qualitative research.

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Positivist

Reality exists “out there” and that it is observable, stable, and measurable; theories on what is observed can be directly tested.

**Postpositivism**: Recognizes that knowledge is relative rather than absolute but “it is possible, using empirical evidence, to distinguish between more and less plausible claims”.

Reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality; there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event.

**Phenomenology**: The study of how people describe things and experience them through their senses (“We can only know what we experience”--Husserl)

**Symbolic interactionism**: Emphasis is on the importance of symbols and the interpretative processes that undergird interactions as fundamental to understanding human behavior.

All thought is mediated by power relations that are historically and socially constructed; Inquiry that aspires to the name ‘critical’ must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society; the goal is to critique and challenge, to transform and empower

Critical research draws from feminist theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, critical ethnography

**Critical**

Postmodernism/Poststructural

Explanations for the way things are in the world are nothing but myths or grand narratives; there is no single “truth” with a capital “T” but there are multiple “truths.”

Highly experimental, playful, and creative, and no two postmodern studies look alike

BASIC PREMISES UNDERLYING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
**Constructed nature of reality**: Social world is actively constructed by interactions.

Insider’s perspective (emic) and an in-depth orientation: It is necessary to study people in their natural settings (e.g. homes, workplaces, public settings).

Exploratory questions and difficult to access groups: It is suited for studying a substantive area about which little is known in order to describe phenomena in detail, and to explore topics that are difficult to study by other means.

Unusual and extreme events: It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to study a single case in-depth, whether it is an historical event, a culture, a subgroup or an individual person.

‘Holy Hell’: How One Man Documented 22 Years Inside a Sadistic Cult

Michel Rostand, the leader of the "cult" Buddhafield, Photo Courtesy of Sundance

Characteristics of Qualitative Research

**Naturalistic inquiry**

Studying real-world situations as they unfold naturally; non-manipulative, unobtrusive, and non-controlling; openness to whatever emerges—lack of predetermined constraints on outcomes

Inductive analysis

Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important categories, dimensions, and interrelationships; begin by exploring genuinely open questions rather than testing theoretically derived (deductive) hypotheses.

Holistic perspective

The whole phenomenon under study is understood as a complex system that is more than the sum of its parts; focus is on complex interdependencies not meaningfully reduced to a few discrete variables and linear, cause-effect relationships.

Qualitative data

Detailed, thick description; inquiry in depth; direct quotations capturing people’s personal perspectives and experiences.

Personal contact and insight

The researcher has direct contact with and gets close to the people, situation, and phenomenon under study; researcher’s personal experiences and insights are an important part of the inquiry and critical to understanding the phenomenon.

Dynamic systems

Attention to process; assumes change is constant and ongoing whether the focus is on an individual or an entire culture.

Unique case orientation

Assumes each case is special and unique; the first level of inquiry is being true to, respecting, and capturing the details of the individual cases being studied; cross-case analysis follows from and depends on the quality of individual case studies.

Context sensitivity
Places findings in a social, historical, and temporal context; dubious of the possibility or meaningfulness of generalizations across time and space

Empathic neutrality

Complete objectivity is impossible; pure subjectivity undermines credibility; the researcher’s passion is understanding the world in all its complexity—not proving something, not advocating, not advancing personal agendas, but understanding; the researcher includes personal experience and empathic insight as part of the relevant data, while taking a neutral nonjudgmental stance toward whatever content may emerge.

Design Flexibility

Open to adapting inquiry as understanding deepens and/or situations change; avoids getting locked into rigid designs that eliminate responsiveness; pursues new paths of discovery as they emerge.

Qualitative research involves:

1. Studying the meaning of people’s lives, in their real-world roles;

2. Representing the views and perspectives of the people (labeled as the participants) in a study;

3. Explicitly attending to and accounting for real-world contextual conditions;

4. Contributing insights from existing or new concepts that may help to explain social behavior and thinking; and,

5. Acknowledging the potential relevance of multiple sources of evidence rather than relying on a single source alone.

QUALITATIVE-QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH COMPARED
### Qualitative-Quantitative Compared

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<th>QUANTITATIVE</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothesis-testing</strong></td>
<td>A flexible, ‘inductive’, ‘abductive’, or data-driven orientation</td>
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<td><strong>The use of numerical data</strong></td>
<td>Relatively unstructured kinds of data are used</td>
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<td><strong>Procedural objectivity</strong></td>
<td>Subjectivity</td>
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<td><strong>Generalization</strong></td>
<td>The study of ‘natural’ settings</td>
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<td><strong>Identifying systematic patterns of association</strong></td>
<td>Small number of cases studied</td>
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<td><strong>Controlling variables</strong></td>
<td>Verbal rather than statistical analysis of data</td>
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Rai on ‘positive loitering’

This was a ‘critical’ ethnographic study of a ‘community policing’ practice introduced by the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy (CAPS) as a way for community members to combat ‘gang presence, public drinking, criminal behavior, and drug activity’ (Rai 2011: 66). The author examines how ‘positive loitering’ was used in a ‘gentrifying Chicago neighborhood’ to try to eradicate an informal street labour market. It involved ‘passive-aggressive flash mob actions where people simply show up and hangout in the spaces where the laborers gather’ (Rai 2011: 67). She observed monthly CAPS meetings, and interventions on the street, and interviewed ‘positive loiterers’, some of the people seeking work, and the organizer of the market. She argues that positive loitering highlights how ‘democratic and neoliberal rhetoric can dovetail in local practices that obscure systemic inequality […]’; and expose the ambivalence of civic participation’ (Rai 2011: 68).

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Morton on ‘becoming tongan’

Having visited Tonga as a teenager, lived in Tongan households in Australia, and later married a Tongan, the anthropologist Helen Morton (1996) carried out eight months’ ethnographic fieldwork living in a village there, along with her young son. She observed what went on and talked to people in the village, recording her data in the form of fieldnotes; though she also used a questionnaire distributed to secondary school students. Her aim was to study the experience of childhood in that society – what it means to become Tongan – seeking as part of this to understand the rather harsh treatment to which Tongan children are often subjected.

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Wacquant on boxing

Loïc Wacquant, a French sociologist working in the United States, became an apprentice boxer ‘by default and by accident’ as part of a study of ‘the everyday reality of the black American ghetto’ (Wacquant 2004: viii). He emphasizes the value of ‘theoretically armed’ participant observation, drawing on the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His aim was ‘to plumb the inner depths’ of what it means to be a boxer, so as to capture and represent ‘the taste and the ache’ of this profession, as pursued in this community (Wacquant 2004: vii). In sociological terms, the task was to document the dispositions and skills involved, and how they are developed and deployed. His data were fieldnotes written up each evening after being in the gym (Wacquant 2004: ix–x).
Bogdan on the autobiography of Jane Fry

In the early 1970s, Robert Bogdan (1974) carried out a series of life history interviews, several times a week over a period of three months, with ‘Jane Fry’ (pseudonym), a transsexual born as a biological male who believed that she was a woman. He transcribed and edited around a hundred hours of audio-recorded material with a view to producing a sociological life history that conveyed her experience and perspective on life. Her ‘autobiography’ – an account in her own words, albeit composed from what she said in interviews – forms the central part of the book. In addition, Bogdan provides a commentary, drawing on medical records, that juxtaposes her perspective with those of the professionals who had been in contact with her at various times.

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Wright and Decker on armed robbers

Active armed robbers in St Louis, Missouri were contacted via a specially recruited and paid fieldworker who was an ex-criminal known to local criminals (Wright and Decker 1997). The researchers met their informants on the streets, and carried out semi-structured interviews asking about robberies in which the informants had been involved. They sometimes took the informant to the scene of a robbery to test his account; and also compared accounts provided by co-offenders. On the basis of these data, they drew conclusions about the role of motivational factors, situational features, and environmental cues in generating armed robberies.

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Mitchell on survivalists

Survivalists are people who ‘anticipate various kinds of imminent cataclysm – economic collapse, race war, nuclear attack, and so forth – and take steps to ensure their own postdisaster welfare’ (Mitchell 1991: 97). They ‘often eschew telephones, launder their mail through letter exchanges, use nicknames and aliases, and carefully conceal their addresses from strangers’ (Mitchell 1991: 100). In order to document survivalist beliefs and practices Mitchell carried out participant observation, covert and overt, and interviews, and began to edit a group newsletter, with the result that he became ‘the recipient of a steady stream of members’ written opinions and perceptions’ (Mitchell 1991: 100). This role then allowed him to use tape recorders and cameras at group meetings. In his book Dancing at Armageddon he provides a picture of the ‘world’ of survivalists and how it reflects and responds to salient features of modern industrial civilization (Mitchell 2001)

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Frake on ‘how to ask for a drink in Subanum’

In a classic study of an ethnic group who were farmers occupying part of the mountainous interior of an island in the Philippines, the author provides a detailed description of their drinking practices (Frake 1964a). This covers the types of drink available within the culture and focuses on how one of these, what he refers to as a type of beer, is drunk at religious festivities that serve important socio-political functions. His aim was to describe in detail what someone must know in order to be a competent member of this culture (Frake 1964b: 112). The information was obtained through observation but also by highly structured interviews designed to elicit the terminological distinctions – about types of drink and the activities surrounding them – employed by the Subanum.

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