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A Qualitative View of the World

THEORY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Just as account supervisors and creative directors seem to live in two separate worlds, researchers who practice primarily quantitative methods, such as surveys and experiments, live in a world very different from that inhabited by qualitative researchers. One is primarily a world of numbers, and the other is primarily a world of words. What one may consider absolutely necessary, the other may consider largely insignificant. Even within the qualitative world, there are differences regarding the mainsprings of human behavior, what is important, and how to demonstrate the validity of research.

It is unusual for one person to be equally skilled in both quantitative and qualitative research or to be equally enthusiastic about the ability of the two approaches to find truth. Although she may be able to appreciate the contributions of the other, deep in her heart, a researcher feels that one approach just seems more naturally correct than the other. Knowing the theoretical foundations on which research techniques are built should improve your abilities as a planner to choose appropriate methods and then to apply those methods to their best advantage. The question of “how many” is

best answered by survey research; however, questions about “what” and “how” are best answered by qualitative research approaches. If you want to know how many people are buying a product, sound survey research combined with random sampling techniques can best answer your question. If you want to know what (the symbolic meaning of a product) people are buying or how they are deciding to buy, then qualitative research may best answer your question.

INSIDE THE QUALITATIVE WORLD

Within the academic and professional research worlds, there are a number of research traditions, all of which fall under the broad umbrella term *qualitative research*. You may encounter such terms as *ecological psychology*, *holistic ethnography*, *critical ethnography*, *cognitive anthropology*, *phenomenology*, *ethnomethodology*, *symbolic interactionism*, *critical inquiry*, *feminist scholarship*, and *case study*. What separates these traditions can be determined by examining the research tradition from which each comes and the relative amount of attention given to (a) *context* and environment, (b) social and cultural structures, (c) social interaction, (d) individual interpretation, and (e) individual free will. For example, critical inquiry and feminist scholarship assume that meaning and behavior are greatly influenced by existing social structures, and they therefore focus on such things as how perceived gender differences, distribution of wealth and power, and cultural beliefs constrain meaning and define behavior. Ecological psychology assumes that individual environment and context are keys to understanding behavior, and symbolic interactionism assumes that patterns of social interaction are most important. Although these differences do exist, the similarities are much greater, and they are what bind together these different research traditions.

In qualitative research, everyone is allowed to be a theorist; it would not be uncommon to find that in some situations, context and structure are powerful determinants of behavior and that in other situations, individual will and volition are more important. The flexibility of qualitative research is its greatest asset; qualitative researchers feel free to pick and choose from various research traditions and research techniques, depending on the research question and the research setting. Researchers steeped in quantitative

methods, where a step-by-step recipe often guides the conducting of research and where researchers have been instructed not to exercise their own judgment or insight, are ill at ease in the qualitative world. For additional discussion on the ways quantitative and qualitative researchers tend to see the world, see Taylor (1994).

ASSUMPTIONS THAT BIND

Despite their differences of emphasis, almost all qualitative researchers agree on certain assumptions about the nature of human behavior. These assumptions include seeing people as active, interpreting individuals who construct worlds of meanings and act upon the world rather than allowing the world to act upon them.

Active Individuals

Qualitative researchers see the world as made up of active, interpreting individuals forging purposeful lines of action to accomplish everyday life. Individuals take note of the things around them, process or assign meaning to those things, and then plan courses of action. Because meaning arises from within, behavior cannot be understood by seeking external forces and causes. Human beings are not simple responders to stimuli. Rather, they are constantly interpreting what things mean and responding accordingly. Consider the simple case of a person crossing a street. As outside observers, we might note that a person remains stationary until the image of an outstretched hand is replaced by the image of a person crossing the street. Is this a case of an external stimulus determining the person's behavior, or is this a case of the person interpreting objects and then choosing a course of action? A quantitative researcher might regard this as an example of stimulus-response behavior with a conditioned response to the change in images. A qualitative researcher, on the other hand, regards this behavior as an example of meaningful interpretation followed by a purposeful course of action. And how does the qualitative researcher know this? He asks the pedestrian to describe how he accomplished this everyday task of crossing the street.

Worlds of Meaning

At the center of explanations for human behavior is the concept of “meaning.” Understand the meaning(s) and you’ll understand the behavior, because behavior follows meaning. Meaning may be shared among individuals: Two or more people (or even two cultures) can agree on what something means. Meaning can also be idiosyncratic, or peculiar to one person. Qualitative researchers seek out shared meanings in order to discover patterns of human behavior. An automobile, of course, is not just a means of transportation. It can also be—all at the same time—an expression of self to an individual, an expression of self to others, an investment, a feeling of freedom, a sensory experience, a means of escape, and an expression of concern for others or for the environment.

Meaning is not static; it changes over time and place, within context, and with people. Something you have accomplished may have one meaning for you at the time of the accomplishment; 10 years later, it may have a different meaning. The accomplishment may be more or less important to you. The accomplishment hasn’t changed at all, but the meaning of the accomplishment has.

From the Participant’s Perspective

In the world of qualitative research, researchers believe that to understand behavior, you must be able to uncover the meaningful objects in people’s worlds and understand those objects from the perspective of the people being studied. Any given product may have one meaning for the producer, another for distributors, and yet other meanings for different groups of consumers. What does it mean to buy and use a certain product category? Within the product category, what kinds of meanings do the various brands or offerings have? How do these meanings lead or connect to decisions to buy certain brands and not others? These are the kinds of questions that qualitative researchers attempt to answer.

By asserting that meaning arises from within the person, qualitative researchers deny that meaning can exist in the object. Product consumption and brands have no meanings except for those that consumers are willing to give them. And these meanings are multiple, individual, shifting, contextual, and shared.

By the turn of this century, smoking cigarettes had taken on a very different meaning than it had in the 1950s. Although product improvements may have been made during the last half of the past century, smoking moved collectively in our judgment from socially acceptable to socially and individually irresponsible. Smoking itself did not change; the meanings, the interpretations—the *reality* of smoking—did, and changes in behavior followed.

Multiple Truths

In a qualitative world, no single, determinable truth exists. Instead, there are truths to be found, and these truths are bound by the time, the context, and the individuals who believe them. Often, shared beliefs or shared realities are what constitute truth. That Brand X is the best cleaning product is a truthful statement within the time and context and for the individuals who believe it. That the world is flat was true within the time and context and for the individuals who believed it.

Obviously, the external world does not allow just any interpretation of itself; there are limits, often defined by culture. However, the limit to interpretations is not “1”; it is a much greater number. Suppose at the end of a business lunch, your potential employee took a piece of bread and pushed it in a circular motion about the surface of his dinner plate, soaking up the last juices of the entree, and then proceeded to eat it. This practice, called sopping, would carry a certain meaning in an American restaurant, probably that the candidate possessed few social skills and lacked a basic knowledge of dining etiquette. However, the exact same behavior in a restaurant in France would be seen as perfectly normal and acceptable. Shift the location to many American supper tables and the behavior remains acceptable. Meaning changes with context.

QUALITATIVE WORDS

Within the qualitative research tradition, certain words carry great significance and meaning. In other traditions, the persons who participate in a research study are commonly called *subjects*

or *respondents*, suggesting a hierarchical relationship between the researcher and others. Qualitative researchers want to narrow the distance between themselves and others and, therefore, prefer the term *participants* to refer to the individuals who assist by providing information to the researcher.

Theory in qualitative research refers to an organizing scheme for the *data* that places them in orderly patterns and provides meaning and insight into the lives of others. Theory is not posited before data collection; it comes out of the data and is thus referred to as *grounded theory*, because it is grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Guesses and suppositions about what the researcher may find are called *working hypotheses* and are altered and revised or cast aside as data collection proceeds.

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple perspectives, multiple methods, multiple research sites, and multiple researchers to understand more fully the object of the investigation. Multiple approaches are always preferred.

THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative researchers begin with *inductive analysis* and then often swing back and forth between inductive and *deductive analyses*. To start inductively means that researchers find objects and attempt to identify and classify them by their characteristics or distinguishing features. An object can be physical, such as a chair; a cultural belief, such as “time is limited”; or a guiding principle, such as “work hard to get ahead.” Then the qualitative researcher moves to the next object and compares it with what already has been defined, asking if the new object fits within the category already established or if it demands a new category. The researcher continues in this fashion until all such categories are defined and the relationships that exist between the categories are established.

Assume that you encounter a spherical-shaped object of orange-yellow color. You note that it grows on a tree. It has a puckery skin that you can peel off. The inside is softer, more watery than the outside, and has a pleasing taste. You might label this “tasty sphere.” Next, you notice another spherical-shaped object of about the same

size resting under the tree. It has a white, leathery skin that can be removed with great difficulty. In fact, the skin appears to have been sewn on. You remove the skin and find yards and yards of string wrapped around a hard center. The center is black, and when you bite it, you discover it is not juicy or soft and has a most unpleasant taste. Is this also an example of a tasty sphere, or are the differences so great as to demand a new category? That depends on the skill of the researcher. Are oranges and baseballs in the same category? Only if we define the category as “spherical-shaped objects.” But in this case, shape is not the essence of the category, and we know that because we went beyond a surface-level investigation. One of the tasks for the qualitative researcher is to go beyond surface descriptions to understand the essence of the world as constructed by the participants.

Qualitative researchers want to know the categories of meaning that participants use in everyday life, but discovering them, categorizing them, and charting their relationships is a little more difficult than distinguishing oranges from baseballs.

QUALITATIVE METHODS

Qualitative research methods are diverse and varied. Any method that allows the researcher to capture the worlds of others can be a valid qualitative technique. These methods include observation, participant observation, in-depth interviewing, documents, and record analysis. Qualitative researchers rarely rely on a single method of gathering data because each method brings its own biases.

Participant observation is sometimes regarded as the purest qualitative research technique because it requires the researcher to spend extended time in a participant’s natural setting observing and learning how to do things the way the participant does things. Want to know what it’s like to work on a production line in a factory? One of the ways to do that is to observe people on the line, listen to them talk about working on the line, and spend some time on the line yourself.

Participant observation is time-consuming and expensive, and in many situations, access to observing can’t be negotiated. If you wanted to study what remedies people take when they have headaches, a pure participant observation approach would require you

to participate and observe individuals until the onset of a headache. This could take several days or weeks of observation before a participant suffers a headache. A more economical approach—but perhaps a less rich one—would be to conduct interviews with consumers regarding when and how headaches occur, what remedies they take, and whether specific remedies are associated with certain kinds of headaches.

You might also convene a group of known headache sufferers and engage them in a group discussion.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Qualitative researchers eschew structured questionnaires and scaling devices because they present the world as constructed by the researcher. A series of statements drawn from the research literature or previous studies presents a view of reality as collected by the instrument writer. Any qualitative research technique will allow for participants to respond in their own words. Thus, it is possible to present a qualitative survey in which respondents have the opportunity to introduce their worlds, not simply respond to the researcher's view of the world.

Almost anything can count as data in a qualitative study. This includes letters, shopping lists, photographs, memos, diaries, essays, audiotaped and videotaped interviews, and group discussion transcripts. Because the planner is looking for anything that can give him insight into the meaningful worlds of his participants, anything that can do that should be used.

Qualitative researchers prefer to use multiple methods and multiple sources of data because any given method of data collection and analysis carries its own biases and weaknesses. Through triangulation, planners hope to get a fuller or more nearly complete understanding of consumers by drawing from multiple sources of data and using multiple techniques.

ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Every qualitative researcher is allowed to be his own theorist. Rather than going into a study with a theory to be tested, qualitative

researchers try to enter the worlds of others without any presuppositions about what they might find. Doing qualitative research requires planners to set aside their own personal biases and be fully open to understanding the world as constructed by others.

Assume that your agency has a federal contract to investigate why teenage mothers on welfare continue to have additional children, and it's up to your agency to develop message strategies that would encourage teen mothers not to have additional children.

Your job as a qualitative researcher is neither to pass judgment on your participants nor to inject your own personal opinions as to why this happens. Your goal is to enter into the world of teen mothers (through observation, interviews, participation, etc.) and to understand the meaning of "children" as the teen mothers construct it. You might have a number of working hypotheses that initially guide your collection of data, but you'll most likely discard or alter these as you begin to collect data. For example, you might wonder beforehand whether teen mothers have additional children

- because they are not knowledgeable about their bodies and birth control methods,
- as a way of trying to maintain a relationship with a partner who may provide financially for the children,
- as a way of gaining additional welfare dollars for their families,
- as a way of increasing their status within the community in which they live, or
- because of peer and social pressures that encourage procreation during the teen years.

Each of these five working hypotheses may offer no explanation, a partial explanation, or (rarely is this the case) the complete explanation. Getting at the meaning of additional children to these mothers requires that you understand the world in which they live as they understand it so that message strategies or programs discouraging a behavior can be developed. Your own personal biases and opinions are of no value here—unless, of course, you have a history of being an unwed teenage mother on welfare. Then your own personal experience and insight can be extremely valuable to you. However, planners should never assume that because they are

also members of the group being studied that their experiences are the same. No two people have exactly the same experience and, thus, don't understand the world in exactly the same way.

The basic question for most qualitative researchers is, "What is going on here?" Any method of inquiry and any method of data analysis that can help answer that question should be considered an acceptable one. Naturally, there is rarely, if ever, just one thing going on. Human behavior is highly complex, and more commonly, the planner will find that multiple things are happening. For example, the question, "What is going on inside the supermarket?" has multiple answers. In fact, the number of answers to what is going on is probably equal to or greater than the number of people inside the supermarket. Some people are at the cash register, scanning packages, taking other people's money, or putting their purchases in bags. Other people are pushing carts, pausing temporarily at different locations, and then deciding whether to place certain items in the cart—sometimes putting items in and then taking them out of the cart and putting them back on the shelf. Some people have lists of items that they consult frequently, and others have no list at all. Some people have many items in their carts, and when the cart is full, they stand in one kind of line. Others seem to have only a few items that they carry in their hands, and they stand in another kind of line. Yet other people are placing items on the shelves, and others are handing out product samples. If we asked the persons mentioned what they were doing, we would probably get answers such as shopping for the week, dropping in after work, running in and out, checking out, waiting, checking people out, bagging, restocking, and sampling—all of which are part of a smooth-flowing supermarket operation.

Because they enter the world of others without preconceived notions about how things are, qualitative researchers often use the term *sensitized concept* rather than *theory*. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) means that any explanation you have is grounded in and comes out of the data, not before data are collected. A sensitized concept is one that's sensitive to and comes out of the data. Common everyday sayings such as "It's not what you know, but who you know" and "Who you are determines the quality of service you get" are in fact theories about how the social world works, grounded in people's everyday experiences.

Coding Paradigms

No two researchers will approach data analysis in exactly the same way. Some planners prefer to do the analysis by hand, working from paper copies of transcripts that they mark up, cut up, rearrange, and put back together in various ways. Other planners prefer to work at a computer, inserting word codes, highlighting texts, inserting comments, and so forth, using a simple word processing program. Still others prefer to use a specialized computer program.

Coding data and using coding paradigms are two ways of reducing data to manageable and meaningful units. Keep in mind that data analysis and coding should begin at the same time as data collection. In survey research, all the data are collected, usually entered into a data analysis program, and then analyzed.

In qualitative research, data collection and tentative analysis occur simultaneously. If you wait until all your transcripts are complete and then try to begin analysis, you will have created an almost unmanageable task for yourself.

Analysis itself can be a long, demanding process. Most researchers will swing back and forth between data collection and data analysis as they complete the research assignment. In fact, your own understanding of the *phenomenon* you're studying tells you when it is time to stop collecting data.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest a coding paradigm that consists of coding data into (a) the phenomenon, (b) conditions, (c) actions/interactions, and (d) consequences. The phenomenon is a repeated pattern of behavior and commonly is the behavior you're trying to understand. A condition is a complex set of events that lead up to the phenomenon. Actions/interactions represent the ways people respond to the phenomenon (or the strategies they use). Consequences represent the end result of the actions/interactions. This coding paradigm is particularly useful when coding for a process, such as decision making. Planners often assume that "buying" or "decisions to buy" are the central phenomena of their studies. When this is the case, the planner might examine the data looking for (a) conditions that lead to purchase (e.g., natural depletion, wearing out, running out, acute need, emergencies), (b) actions/interactions involved in the buying decision (e.g., gathering information, making price comparisons, asking a

friend, looking for information on the World Wide Web, visiting a retail location), and (c) consequences (e.g., satisfaction, dissatisfaction, unexpected benefits, repeat purchase, depleting the savings account, prideful ownership).

Using a coding paradigm created by others can be handy in the initial coding stages because it makes you look at the data in different ways and may allow you to see relationships within the data that are not obvious. The Strauss and Corbin paradigm is especially helpful when coding for process and when coding for the duality of structural features (often the conditions) and action.

However, planners should not be reluctant to develop their own coding paradigms. Some researchers, for example, are content to code for major themes or trends in the data without charting the relationships among the themes. For example, a study of the current buying patterns among teenagers might include fashion trends, eating-out patterns, musical tastes, activities with friends, and part-time work. There may or may not be a relationship among the various themes (a pure qualitative researcher will believe there is!), and only one or two dominant themes may be of interest to the client. In such cases, the planner may be satisfied to stop with a thematic analysis.

Still other planners may wish to do a metaphorical analysis of the words that participants use. *Metaphors* take the characteristics of one thing and associate them with something entirely different; they are powerful ways of making intangible concepts more tangible. By talking about a thing in terms of something else in an effort to make it more comprehensible, metaphors can be used to provide powerful insight into how people think of themselves and how they behave (Felton, 1994). Consider this quote from a corporate trainer:

I just can't seem to get through everything I need to in the time we have. There're always so many people interrupting me with questions and making me lose my place. I'm very frustrated with not being able to finish the training session on time.

To code for metaphors, we ask how the language and expressions used by the participant reflect other figures or jobs. The

participant says he “can’t get through . . . on time,” “interrupting me,” “losing my place,” “not able to finish on time.” Obviously, the trainer sees himself as someone who must adhere to a fixed time schedule, have no interruptions, maintain a train of thought, and finish on time. Metaphorically, the participant’s language is based in transportation. More listening on our part might help establish the means of transportation: Is he an Amtrak engineer speeding down the train(er’s) track? An airline pilot on his way from New York to Los Angeles? A captain of a cruise ship? These types of insights into how people see themselves can help us understand their worlds.

Metaphors exist within the language but slightly below the surface level. Most are usually not visible to the persons who speak them. Nonetheless, they sometimes pop out at the planner and can be a useful analytical tool.

Getting It Right

If human behavior is as complicated as qualitative researchers believe, how is the planner ever to know if she has gotten it right? Unfortunately, no simple test or assessment can confirm the validity of an interpretation. However, there are some procedures and safeguards that planners can use to reduce the chances that they got it wrong.

First, planners have to accept that producing an interpretation of people’s behavior that is a verisimilitude, or exact copy, of human behavior is impossible. The best you can produce is a reasonable interpretation that appears to explain the behavior. Before entering a research setting, planners should ask themselves (through working hypotheses) what they think is going on. If the answer after the research is the same as before, the planner has probably gotten it wrong: Rather than discovering a pattern of behavior, the planner has imposed her own interpretation on the data. Keeping track of your own personal biases, prejudices, and opinions before and during the research process helps guard against their overly influencing your interpretation of the data. Writing these down beforehand is a good idea.

During the data collection and temporary analysis of data, planners can write memos or notes to themselves, expressing

their initial reactions and conclusions. Tracking these during the research process can help you determine if you have come to understand others or if you have imposed your own interpretations on the data.

Asking a colleague or team member to determine if your interpretations are reasonable based on her examination of some of the transcripts and your coding scheme is another way to guard against personal bias. Particularly in a team research situation, all members must come to a shared understanding of what the data mean.

Yet another way to guard against personal bias is to take your interpretations back to your participants and ask them if they agree. In the process of analysis, you should write summaries of your thoughts on the interviews you're conducting. Ask the participants to read the summaries of their interviews to see if your interpretation matches the participant's perspective.

In the final analysis, it's not so much whether you understood all the behavior you may have observed or listened to people talk about but whether you have a sufficient understanding to speak to the client on behalf of your research participants. Can you provide a reasonable description of the world of the people you have studied from their perspective(s)? If so, you have accomplished your research task as a planner.

MULTIPLE VERSUS MIXED METHODS

In recent years, there has been a movement within research communities to mix methods on research projects—that is, to combine survey research with, for example, interviews. Quantitative researchers sometimes refer to this mixing of methods as “adding qualitative flesh to quantitative bones.”

From a theoretical view, the qualitative paradigm and the quantitative paradigm do not “mix” well. Most mixed-methods studies are driven by the assumptions underlying quantitative research, not qualitative research. Quantitative research is conducted from the point of view of the researcher, not from that of the participant. Quantitative research advocates an external truth knowable to the researcher and not to the participant. In quantitative research, “what people say” is generally irrelevant; in qualitative, it is the

essence of the approach. Thus, the underlying assumptions driving the two approaches are seen as contradictory.

This is not to argue that advocates from one approach cannot learn from and borrow techniques from the other. Suppose, for example, you have conducted long interviews with individuals about a procedure being introduced in a workplace. Let's say the procedure is a new electronic surveillance system used to record whether healthcare workers are following prescribed guidelines for washing their hands before touching hospital patients. Such an introduction is likely to induce strong reactions. From your interviews, you might draw a number of positive and negative statements, create a degree-of-agreement scale, and administer the scale to all the workers falling under the guidelines to get some sense of the distribution of opinions. In doing so, you have maintained the perspectives of the participants while gauging the depth of agreement among the larger population. Generally, long interviews of 10 to 15 participants are sufficient to uncover the range of meanings associated with a particular phenomenon within a shared culture. If you had derived a scale based on your own understanding of the phenomenon or based on published research, you would have failed to capture the "from the participants' perspectives" aspect so critical to conducting good qualitative research. If you want to understand, and ultimately change, human behavior, you must understand the meanings of the things that lead to the behavior.

Certainly, survey researchers can add understanding to their findings by interviewing some respondents, but the boundaries of the understanding are predetermined by the survey questions. If you ever have been asked to fill out a questionnaire and found that none of the available response categories matched what you thought, you have encountered the setting of the boundaries of meaning by someone else.

Qualitative researchers often use purposive sampling, where persons to be interviewed are chosen for a particular reason related to the study, such as growing up in a one-parent household; being a high school dropout; or being a brand-loyal, heavy user of a product. When no clear logic exists for choosing the sample, then generating a small random sample from a list of the universe, just as quantitative researchers do, makes good sense.

Qualitative research is always made stronger by the use of multiple methods, multiple perspectives, and multiple researchers. If data collected from individual interviews, document analysis, participant observation, and group discussions all point to the same meanings, then the researcher can be confident that she has found something meaningful in the lives of the participants. This use of multiple methods within the qualitative set of assumptions is called triangulation.

If you are asked to join a mixed-methods research team as a qualitative researcher, clarify your role in advance. Will you be asked to “add flesh to quantitative bones”—essentially using a qualitative method to add explanation to quantitative findings? Or will you be asked to design a qualitative study from the ground up? Attempting to “add flesh” is not nearly as challenging as designing a plan to uncover the essence of the phenomenon.

SUMMARY

Qualitative researchers see individuals as active, interpreting beings who construct worlds of meaning and act upon the world rather than allowing the world to act upon them. Qualitative research seeks to see and understand the world from the perspective of the people being studied.

Meaning is a central concept in qualitative studies because meaning and interpretation guide behavior. Meaning is said to be multiple, changing, and dependent on context and time.

Qualitative researchers prefer to use multiple research methods because of the inherent bias in any given method. Data can be analyzed in a variety of ways, including process analysis, thematic analysis, and metaphorical analysis.

Researchers guard against personal bias in their interpretations of human behavior by articulating their own biases before the research begins, tracking their interpretations as they change, asking colleagues to review their interpretations, and sharing their interpretations with their participants.

Qualitative research turns many of the so-called standard research procedures upside down. Getting close to consumers,

making them partners in the research process, and massaging data are not research crimes within the qualitative research traditions. The following chapter on ethnographic methods reveals some ways to get close to your consumers so you can understand them better.

KEY TERMS

context: The surroundings or environment in which a phenomenon occurs. Context changes the meaning of the phenomenon.

data: Anything created or changed by humans that gives the researcher insight into how the participants construct their realities.

deductive analysis: Procedure that begins with a broad, general statement about relationships you hope to find.

grounded theory: Theory that is grounded in the data.

inductive analysis: Procedure that begins with focusing on a single observation.

metaphor: A way of understanding the essence of something not well understood by comparing it to something more readily understood.

participants: People from whom the researcher gathers information.

phenomenon: Something that becomes the central focus of a research study, often not obvious at the beginning of a qualitative study.

reality: What is perceived to be true by an individual or by groups of individuals. Reality exists within the meaning structures created by the individuals and not in the objects of the physical world. Reality is not static; it changes across time, space, context, and with individuals.

sensitized concept: A concept sensitive to the data that helps explain relationships found in the data.

theory: The organizing scheme that helps you make sense of your data. It grows out of the analytical process; it is not posited before.

triangulation: Using more than one method or perspective in a qualitative study. A researcher could triangulate interviews and

text analysis or thematic analysis and metaphorical analysis. The assumption is that if two sets of data or two types of analysis suggest the same thing, then the researcher can have greater confidence in the findings.

working hypothesis: A researcher's hunch about what he or she may find. Hypotheses are discarded or changed as additional data support or fail to support them.

EXERCISES

1. Talk to 8 or 10 of your friends about their favorite item of clothing. Ask them to talk about how they acquired it, how long they have had it, where and when they wear it, and what makes it special to them. What insights can you draw from the conversations about the meaning of clothes? Is the meaning in the item or in the person? Can you find instances where interaction with others has reinforced or changed the meaning? Are there differences in your understanding between participants who were wearing or able to show you the item compared with those who could only describe it? Does the context in which the person wears the item change the meaning in any way? How can these insights be used to develop message strategy for (a) a laundry detergent that claims to work gently on colors and fibers, (b) a dry cleaning business, (c) a clothing alteration business, or (d) the introduction of a vintage line of clothing?

2. Ask several people to tell you about items they have inherited (or hope to inherit) from a relative. Ask them to tell you about what they think the item meant to the relative and what it means to them. How has the relative's owning the item influenced the meaning of the item for the person who now owns it?

3. Ask separately a male friend and a female friend to talk to you about how they have celebrated Valentine's Day over the years. How does the meaning of this holiday change over time? How do you think the meaning of this holiday differs between genders as well as within genders? Why don't all men or all women feel the same way?

4. A quantitative study of hand-washing practices among healthcare workers concluded that healthcare workers did not wash their hands as often as they should because there were not enough wash stations. Why do you think adding more wash stations did not improve the rate?

RELATED READING

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