

The Personal Nature of Qualitative Research

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You already have some familiarity with qualitative research methods, whether you realize it or not. Regardless of how many courses you've taken, much of your life has been spent investigating issues and subjects that intrigue or confuse you. You set upon a mission to read what you can on the subject, talk to people who might know things that are relevant and useful, observe circumstances and contexts in which this phenomenon is often present, and compare what you have learned to what you think you already know. Then you try to make sense of everything you've collected and arrive at some sort of theory or synthesis to explain what you sought to understand. This process is not much different from what you will learn in this book. We aim to teach you a more systematic, strategic, and effective way to go about researching what you most want to know and understand.

In this first chapter, after introducing ourselves to you through our own personal qualitative journeys, we will review some of the basic concepts and principles that are part of this research strategy. Although this book can stand alone as a text or resource, you will need to consult other sources to learn the more practical dimensions of actually conducting your own studies. Our goal is to increase your understanding of qualitative research by capturing your interest within the stories of two dozen journeys undertaken by students, and the methods they used. Each narrative highlights some of the most important ideas regarding the conceptual and pragmatic challenges that you will face.

Victor Minichiello's Qualitative Journey

My passion for doing qualitative research can be traced to my undergraduate studies. I have always loved both new adventures and talking to people. I enjoy finding patterns within conversations, but struggle when working with numbers or appreciating, let alone understanding, mathematical formulae. I was taking two research method courses in the same semester: one qualitative, the other statistics. I looked forward to the qualitative classes and listening to the fieldwork stories of my professor, reading the books or articles he assigned, and doing the assignments. This course was a joy and hit a chord with me that reverberates to this day. In contrast, I found it difficult to remain awake while listening to my statistics professor talking about means, central tendencies, chi-squares, multivariate analysis, and regression equations, and I hated reading the assigned books and doing the assignments.

It was, however, an assignment in the qualitative course that launched me on my own journey as a researcher. So powerful was this fieldwork experience that I have used it to teach others about the concept of establishing rapport ever since (Minichiello, Aroni, & Minichiello, 2008; Minichiello, Madison, Hays, & Parmenter, 2004). So what was the assignment? Our professor, a prominent second-generation sociologist of The Chicago School, went around the room assigning topics to each student. We were asked to conduct three or four interviews. When he came to me he said, "Your topic is to understand the funeral business through the eyes of the funeral directors." For a nineteen-year-old, this was a very unusual, not to mention disturbing, topic. Or so I thought at the time. I had never even entered a funeral home nor attended a funeral.

After the initial shock wore off, I found this topic both challenging and exciting, perhaps because death holds such a morbid fascination for most people, including me. Who do I interview first? How do I approach these people? What questions do I ask? Do I really want to understand the funeral business from someone else's perspective? After all, what is there to really understand? People die and the funeral industry prepares the body for its public farewell and physical disposition from our world. Big deal. End of story. Literally. Well, to cut a long story short, my first interview is still alive with me today. That is where I learned much of what I now understand about the power of conversation to elicit amazing data. One of the most important aspects of doing qualitative research is establishing rapport. You need special interpersonal qualities to conduct such research, a topic we will discuss later.

Fortunately, for my first research experience I located an enthusiastic interviewee. He had wanted to tell his story for some time and I came along at the right moment in his life. He was keen to tell me that funeral directors are business people, grief counselors, and managers. This immediately

challenged my way of thinking about *them* and some of the misconceptions I had in my own mind.

Within a few minutes of our meeting, the funeral director asked me if I wanted to see the showroom. I had no idea what he was talking about since I had never been in such a place before. But the wise words of my professor stayed with me: “Be courteous, open to exploring new adventures and ideas, and prepared to take some risks in order to establish rapport; this is a key feature of people trusting you and letting you into their world as an honored guest.” I accepted the invitation not really knowing where I was going to end up.

I soon learned that the showroom was where the coffins are displayed. I nervously entered the room, and he gave me a tour and information about the coffins. My eyes caught the attention of a particular coffin priced at more than \$12,000 (a lot of money at the time). I asked, “Why is this one so expensive?”

The response that followed was one that I had not anticipated. “Why don’t you try it out?” he replied. And here is where the human interaction skills come into play when you are doing qualitative research. This invitation created a dilemma for me. If I refused the invitation, the informant could interpret this as a sign that I had negative attitudes toward his profession. This might be his test to see if he could trust me. If I accepted the invitation, the cost would be having nightmares (which I have had since) about the experience. I cautiously slipped into the coffin and learned many important things about these structures. More important, though, was what I learned with respect to qualitative research: I learned how dynamic and fluid qualitative fieldwork is and that my action was important in winning the informant’s trust and confidence.

Qualitative research suits my personality. I enjoy talking to people, asking them questions, exploring their experiences. I’m curious about what people do and why they think, feel, and act the way they do. Having said this, I am also a practitioner of quantitative methods. I have conducted many large-scale survey studies, and I appreciate how much knowledge can be gained through the analysis of quantitative data.

All of my fieldwork experiences have some elements of complex human interactions and I have grown as a result of these experiences. Here I provide a sample of how qualitative studies have impacted me, both personally and professionally. I have always felt that older people get a raw deal in our society. In one study, I worked with a number of my colleagues to interview older people about their experiences of ageism (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000). What I learned was that older people have their own language to talk about their experiences of being discriminated against that center around being seen as old and being treated as old. Our study highlighted how, despite our best intentions, many interactions with older people can make them feel like second-class citizens. As a result of this research I have aspirations to be an activist so that I can minimize the

impact of ageism in my own (and other people's) later life. I was inspired by interviewing older people who, rather than wanting to accept situations as they are and ignore the unpleasant consequences of ageist interactions, wanted to negotiate for themselves and others new images of aging and find ways to minimize the impact of ageism on their lives. These people were working out ways to prevent others from seeing them as old and treating them as old. In the same way that feminist research has changed how sexism is played out in society, I hope that studies like this can produce greater awareness and actually change behavior.

Another area that interests me is HIV/AIDS, and how people who have it live with their disease (Minichiello, 1992). The first challenge that I faced was coming to terms with my own risk of contracting HIV/AIDS as a gay man. I found these interviews powerful and haunting. One of the major themes that emerged was the theme of family members ostracizing and abandoning their sons after discovering they were gay. The impact of this disclosure during a time of illness had huge consequences for all concerned, including the health-care system. It forced me to discuss these issues with my partner and family in ways that I probably would have not done otherwise. For example, I always found it difficult to discuss my sexuality with my father, but this research taught me that my hesitation rested with me rather than with my father.

I also directed a study that examined how male sex workers negotiate the context of selling sex to another man (Browne & Minichiello, 1995). I was interested in this topic because the issue of HIV/AIDS had emerged on the scene and because all the studies focused on the female sex industry. I thought that this was strange, because the male body is now being portrayed as a commodity as well, not to mention that HIV/AIDS in most Western countries is transmitted via male-to-male sex. The interviews allowed me to see how important sex is for males; both gay and nongay identifying men were seeking sexual experiences with other males. This was eye opening for me because it challenged my understanding of how sexuality is defined in society versus what really appears to be going on. My most fulfilling research experiences have been similar to this experience in the sense that my view of the world has been altered as a result.

Through the interviews, I discovered that commercial sex is not really seen as *sex* by some workers, and discovered the significance of the concept of work sex for public health. I was able to work with this concept to educate sex workers about the importance of engaging in safe practices and teaching their clients to do the same. As a result of this work, we developed public health campaigns about safety in the sex industry. One of the most rewarding aspects of this work is that Australia enjoys one of the lowest rates of HIV transmissions via the sex industry in the world. I'm proud to say that our health promotion campaigns have played an important role here.

Jeffrey Kottler's Qualitative Journey

I was born a qualitative researcher, as most of us were. What I mean by that is that I have always been naturally curious and trying to make sense of the world, and especially to make sense of where I fit in the grand scheme of things. I remember doing an investigation in high school for an assigned paper in which I was searching to explain my impatience, why I was always in a hurry to get things done and move on to the next thing. I concluded that it had had something to do with being born premature, six weeks before my anticipated due date. This became an operating assumption in the way I lived my life—it was an explanation that justified my behavior, if not explained it: “Sure I’m impatient, but what do you expect? I couldn’t wait to jump out of my mother’s womb and get started.”

It was a lovely theory that helped me to make sense of my behavior, even if it was neither very psychologically sophisticated nor probably very accurate. About the time I began my academic career, my father had a right-hemisphere stroke, destroying the part of his brain that controlled his left side as well as a number of cognitive functions, including some inhibition. It was during one of our conversations soon after the incident that I asked him a question I had always wondered about—why he married my mother. As long as I could remember, I had never seen my parents show much affection. Instead, I only saw them bicker and argue endlessly. By the time they divorced when I was twelve, I was in many ways relieved that maybe the tension in our house would ease. But it never made sense to me for why they had been together, since they seemed to demonstrate so little love.

Stroke addled, my father blurted out a family secret: my parents had been forced into a shotgun wedding because my mother had gotten pregnant with me (this was considered scandalous during these times). They predated their marriage certificate so it would show that I had been born nine months after the wedding, when in fact I had been born six weeks previous to that. In other words, I had been a full-term baby and had never been premature! My whole definition of self collapsed in that moment. I was so stunned I could do nothing but laugh hysterically. (My father thought it was pretty funny as well and had been dying to tell someone after all these years.)

As you can imagine, this got me thinking. I considered all the other assumptions that we might hold about our realities and how they are constructed, often based on data that are imperfect, biased, and certainly subjective. I was by that time already a practicing therapist so I was certainly familiar with the ways human beings inform (and delude) themselves. I also was quite taken with how much I could learn from people if I practiced respectful listening, asked a few probing questions, and reflected back what I heard. It was simply amazing the stuff that would come out of such

conversations. At the time, I had clients who were prostitutes, drug addicts, corporate CEOs, circus performers—you name it. And I was getting the education of a lifetime. Naturally, I was impatient to learn more.

My journey as a researcher has consistently followed a path of confronting a question that perplexes me, one that literally keeps me up at night trying to figure out what is going on. While still a graduate student, I harbored my own deep secret that I was crazy, that someday I would totally flip out. I had struggled with depression on and off throughout this time, just as my mother had throughout her abbreviated life. I was convinced that if people only realized how crazy I really was that nobody would ever talk to me again. So I launched a research project to study the history of deviant behavior, especially among those who are extraordinarily creative. This would become a journey that would last the next thirty years, and would culminate finally in a study of such “divine madness” (Kottler, 2006).

It turned out that I was able to attain a state of emotional stability during these early years, mostly as a result of the therapy I received as a client. By then, though, I was hooked on the methodology of finding out what I most wanted to know by talking to people. Since that time, every instance in which I am bewildered by an issue that is of great importance to me and for which I can find no satisfactory answers in the existing literature is the impetus for me to begin another research project.

Being amused and fascinated by the things I do when I’m alone, stuff I’ve never admitted to anyone before (pretending my house is under attack by aliens, talking to myself in strange voices, and so on) led me to wonder what everyone else does behind closed doors. I interviewed more than five hundred people during a ten-year span about what they do when they’re alone and what that means for them (Kottler, 1990).

When my academic department was embroiled in conflict and I could find no useful material to get at the essence of such disrespect I began another journey to discover the ways that people externalize blame for their own misery (Kottler, 1994). When I started to become aware as a therapist how my personal and professional lives intersected, I started to talk to other clinicians about their own experiences (Kottler, 1987). In spite of all I accomplished in life, I still felt like a failure much of the time and wondered why professionals spoke so infrequently about their own struggles with imperfection. This led to two different studies, more than a decade apart, in which I interviewed prominent practitioners about their worst failures (Kottler & Blau, 1989; Kottler & Carlson, 2002). It also led me to investigate how clinicians struggle with their most difficult, challenging clients (Kottler, 1992; Kottler & Carlson, 2003).

I had an experience in which I stopped crying for many years, and then started to become more emotional after a near-death experience. What was *that* all about and why is there so little written and understood about

the meaning of tears in people's lives? How do men and women cry differently and how is such behavior influenced by culture and context? Another study was launched (Kottler, 1996).

When I became fascinated with the ways my students and clients had transformed me over the years, I set about interviewing the most famous theoreticians about their own reciprocal influence experiences (Kottler, 2006). The same was true when I came back from a trip abroad a radically different person and wondered how other people's lives are transformed by travel experiences that shook up their worlds. I interviewed scores of people about the ways that trips had changed their lives as a result of being strangers in a strange land (Kottler, 1997).

Most recently, I am embarked on several other journeys (remember: I'm still impatient even if not born prematurely), studying the ways that students and professionals are impacted by their involvement in social justice projects (Kottler & Marriner, 2009), as well as another project interviewing distinguished theoreticians about their most creative breakthroughs (Kottler & Carlson, 2009). In each of these cases and so many others I could name, my journeys begin with intense curiosity to make sense of something that eludes me. After consulting existing research and literature, I still feel like there is something significant that is missing. And the way I prefer to explore these areas with so little understood is to identify those individuals who are in the best position to inform me about their own experiences. It is from such investigations that new theories are developed, new phenomena are understood, and professionals in a variety of disciplines can be better informed about concepts that can guide their practice.

Whereas I have been fortunate enough to be able to publish my work, it is the journey that is as important as the outcome in qualitative research. Whether anyone else ever read what I had discovered, I still experienced the joy, satisfaction, and greater wisdom of exploring those issues that interest me the most. That is what makes doing qualitative research so incredibly exciting for me and why I am so delighted to share more of this process with you.

Your Own Personal Dimensions

You can't understand qualitative research without understanding your personality—that is, your own motives, interests, values, and goals. What are you searching for and what is that journey really about? It is not just about advancing knowledge and science, but also about pursuing a personal agenda. This is not only legitimate to acknowledge but important to the process. It is a distinguishing feature of the approach that differentiates it from quantitative methods in which objectivity and detachment are the hallmarks.

As should be immediately evident in our research journeys, qualitative methods embrace and honor subjective experience—not only of the informants and participants, but also of the investigator. Many of the phenomena we explored were intimately connected to our own most cherished interests. That is not to say that we jettisoned academic rigor and scientific process; on the contrary, some of the greatest contributions to the advancement of knowledge occurred from qualitative studies. Think of Sigmund Freud's theories, based on a few case studies, or Jean Piaget's developmental stages, based on in-depth observations of a limited sample of children. Darwin's theory of evolution was based largely on the constant comparison method that is such an integral part of data analysis in qualitative research. Before Galileo or Einstein attempted to measure the properties of the universe, they first built theories grounded in observational data.

All knowledge is *socially constructed*, meaning that all beliefs and assumptions occur within a personal and cultural context. The topics that are chosen, how they locate that study within a body of knowledge, the approach that is selected, the procedures that are employed—are all influenced by the researcher's perceptions. Contrary to what you might think, this is not necessarily a weakness, but rather a strength of the approach, particularly if the researcher engages in rigorous self-reflection and careful analysis.

In the next chapter, we review many of the most important features of any qualitative study, describing some of the theoretical and methodological concepts. We also provide a context for the narrative journeys represented in each chapter, including the methodological decisions that were made and the assumptions that guided those choices. Somewhat unique in our treatment of the subject is an effort to present the material in the most accessible way possible.

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