SHARAN B. MERRIAM   ELIZABETH J. TISDELL

FOURTH EDITION

Qualitative Research

A Guide to Design and Implementation

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

A Guide to Design and Implementation

Fourth Edition

Sharan B. Merriam

Elizabeth J. Tisdell

JB JOSSEY-BASS™

A Wiley Brand

Cover design by
Cover image: ©

The Jossey-Bass Higher and
Adult Education Series

CONTENTS

Preface

Qualitative research is a mature field of study with its own literature base, research journals, special interest groups, and regularly scheduled conferences. Indeed, staying current is a daunting task for any single individual. Van Maanen (2011) humorously describes trying to "keep up" with developments in ethnography, just one type of qualitative research:

> The ethnography industry now includes the ceaseless production of authoritative monographs, exhaustive reviews of the literature(s), method manuals, encyclopedias of concepts and theories, meta-critical expositions, themed anthologies, handbooks of door-stopping weight, established and quasi-established journal publications, formal presentations of talks and papers presided over by umpteen academic societies, online publications, blogs, topical chat-rooms, message boards, forums, social networking sites, and on and on. The answer then to how a single person can keep up without gagging is that he or she can't, for the potentially relevant materials are overwhelming, and new theories, new problems, new topics, new concepts, and new critiques of older work multiply with each passing year. It seems the best one can do is to selectively pursue and cultivate an ever-diminishing proportion of the potentially relevant work that comes one's way and assume an attitude of benign neglect toward the rest. (p. 146)

However, what *has* remained constant amidst the burgeoning of resources for doing qualitative research is the value of a practical guide for designing and implementing this type of research. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* represents our effort to explain qualitative research in an easy-to-follow narrative accessible to both novice and experienced researchers.

In essence, it is a practical guide without being just a "cookbook" for conducting qualitative research; readers also come to understand the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of this research paradigm.

This edition of *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* represents the latest iteration in thinking about and understanding qualitative research. The first edition, published in 1988, centered on qualitative *case study* research; the 1998 second edition featured *qualitative research,* with case study as a secondary focus. The 2009 third edition saw a further reduction in the attention to qualitative case studies. For this fourth edition the focus is largely on interpretive/constructivist qualitative research, of which qualitative case study is one common design, along with what we call a "basic" qualitative study, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and a phenomenological qualitative study. In fact, we have retained and updated the chapter on "types" of qualitative research because from our experiences teaching and conducting workshops, there is little clarity about the differences among these approaches for researchers new to qualitative research—hence, a chapter devoted to differentiating among these common types, as well as exploring their overlaps.

There are two other substantive changes to this fourth edition of *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation.* First, we have added a new chapter of research designs in which qualitative methods are heavily used, often with other more quantitative and/ or creative methods. This chapter reviews mixed methods, action research, critical research, and arts based research. The second substantive change in this edition is more attention to how technology permeates the process—as in, for example, online data sources and qualitative data analysis software packages.

This book continues to be positioned in applied fields of practice. Participants in our workshops and courses have come from nursing, social work, management, allied health, administration, counseling, religion, business gerontology, and human resource development, among others, as well as every subfield of education. Although our field of practice is adult education, and therefore there are many examples from education and adult education, we have made an effort to bring in examples from a

variety of fields of practice. Certainly the design and implementation of a qualitative study is the same across these fields.

Another defining characteristic of this book is its how-to, practical focus, wherein the mechanics of conducting a qualitative study are presented in a simple, straightforward manner. Designing a qualitative study, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the research report are topics logically presented and liberally illustrated to assist the new researcher desiring some guidance in the process. The revisions in these chapters have greatly benefited from our having access to nearly a decade of additional resources published since the third edition; our own research; our supervision of dozens of qualitative dissertations; and, in particular, Sharan's conducting certificate programs in qualitative research methods in South Africa, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea. From these hands-on workshops have come techniques, resources, and strategies for assisting learners in understanding and conducting qualitative research. Thus for this fourth edition we draw upon recent literature in the field as well as our own experiences with qualitative research. The intended audiences for this book, then, are practitioners and graduate students in applied fields of practice who are interested in a basic understanding of how to design and conduct a qualitative study.

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

The organization of this text reflects the process of conducting a qualitative research investigation. Part One contains four chapters. The first is on the nature of qualitative research, the second covers several common types of qualitative research, and the third presents other designs in which qualitative methods constitute a major part of the methodology. The fourth explains the procedure for designing a qualitative study, from identifying a gap in the knowledge base, to forming a problem statement framed by the relevant literature, to selecting the particular qualitative design most appropriate for your question, to selecting a sample. Part Two consists of three chapters that detail data collection techniques. The three chapters in Part Three deal with analyzing the data collected; handling concerns about reliability, validity, and ethics; and writing the final report. We have also included in an appendix a qualitative

methodology template created for graduate students who are designing a qualitative thesis or dissertation.

Chapter One positions qualitative research within research in general, discusses the roots of qualitative research in sociology and anthropology, and briefly describes early contributions in the development of qualitative research as a field itself. Next, the chapter reviews the philosophical/epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research as it contrasts with positivist (or quantitative), critical, and postmodern research traditions. Drawing from its philosophical foundations, the chapter defines and then presents the characteristics of qualitative research. It closes with a discussion of the investigator characteristics and skills needed to conduct a qualitative study.

Writers have organized the variety of types of qualitative studies into various traditions or approaches. Chapter Two reviews six of the more common types of qualitative studies found across applied fields of practice. The first type discussed is what we call a "basic" qualitative research study. This is by far the most common type of qualitative study found in education and most likely in other fields of practice; other texts on qualitative research often fail to address the fact that you can conduct a qualitative study without its being a particular type of qualitative study (such as a phenomenological study, a narrative inquiry, and so on). Other types of qualitative research share all the characteristics of a basic qualitative study but have an additional dimension. Other types and their unique characteristics discussed in this chapter are phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative analysis, and qualitative case study research.

Chapter Three presents several more recent and increasingly more common types of research that have a major qualitative methods component, and have contributed to expanding the qualitative paradigm in the past decade. These include mixed method designs that make use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, action research, critical research, and arts based research (ABR). Action research is intended to solve a problem in practice and make something happen in the research process itself, whereas critical research is specifically intended to challenge power relations. Arts based approaches incorporate one or more multiple forms of art into the data collection and analysis

process. There can be some overlap in these types of studies; for example, arts based approaches can be incorporated into action research, critical research, or other types of studies.

Knowledge of previous research and theory can help a researcher focus on the problem of interest and select the unit of analysis most relevant to the problem. Chapter Four explains what a theoretical framework is and shows how reviewing relevant literature contributes not only to identifying the study's theoretical framework but also to shaping the problem statement. The problem statement lays out the logic and purpose of the study and is critical to making informed decisions regarding sample selection (also covered in this chapter), data collection, and data analysis.

Data collection techniques are covered in the three chapters in Part Two. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven examine the three primary means of collecting data in qualitative research. Interviews, discussed in Chapter Five, can range in structure from a list of predetermined questions to a totally free-ranging interview in which nothing is set ahead of time. The success of an interview depends on the nature of the interaction between the interviewer and the respondent and on the interviewer's skill in asking good questions. Chapter Five also covers how to record and evaluate interview data.

Observations differ from interviews in that the researcher obtains a first-hand account of the phenomenon of interest rather than relying on someone else's interpretation. Chapter Six discusses what to observe, the interdependent relationship between observer and observed, and how to record observations in the form of field notes. Chapter Seven presents the third primary source of qualitative data: documents and artifacts. The term *document* is broadly defined to cover an assortment of written records, physical traces, and visual images. Although some documents might be developed at the investigator's request, most are produced independently of the research study and thus offer a valuable resource for confirming insights gained through interviews and observations. Chapter Seven covers various types of documents, their use in qualitative research, and their strengths and limitations as sources of data.

Many general texts on qualitative research devote more space to theoretical discussions of methodology and data collection than

to the actual management and analysis of data once they have been collected. However, we have discovered in our many years of experience teaching and conducting qualitative research that the most difficult part of the entire process is *analyzing* qualitative data. We have also come to firmly believe that to learn how to do analysis, there is no substitute for actually engaging in analysis, preferably with one's own data. Nevertheless, in Chapter Eight we have tried to present as clear a discussion as possible on how to analyze qualitative data. The importance of analyzing data while they are being collected is underscored; some suggestions for analysis early in the study during data collection are also included. Management of the voluminous data typical of a qualitative study is another topic addressed in this chapter. The heart of the chapter presents an inductive analysis strategy for constructing categories or themes that become the findings of the study. The chapter also includes a discussion of the role of computer software programs in qualitative data analysis. The final section of this chapter reviews data analysis strategies particular to the types of qualitative research discussed in Chapter Two (such as phenomenology and narrative inquiry).

All researchers are concerned with producing valid and reliable findings. Chapter Nine explores the issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. In particular, internal validity, reliability, and external validity are discussed, and strategies are offered for dealing with each of these issues. Also of concern to researchers is how to conduct an investigation in an ethical manner, which in turn impacts the trustworthiness of your study. Chapter Nine closes with a section on ethics, paying particular attention to ethical dilemmas likely to arise in qualitative research.

Many an educator has been able to design a study, collect relevant data, and even analyze the data, but then has failed to carry through in the important last step—writing up the results. Without this step, the research has little chance of advancing the knowledge base of the field or having an impact on practice. Chapter Ten is designed to help qualitative researchers complete the research process by writing a report of their investigation. The first half of the chapter offers suggestions for organizing the writing process—determining the audience for the report, settling on the main message, and outlining the overall report. The rest of the chapter

focuses on the content of the report—its components and where to place them, how to achieve a good balance between description and analysis, and how to disseminate the study's findings.

Finally, the appendix presents a template created for graduate students and others who would like some guidance in what goes into a methodology chapter or proposal of a qualitative research study. This template is an outline of the component parts of a methodology chapter, explaining what needs to be included under each section. A modification of this outline could also be used for the methodology section of a qualitative research grant proposal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We want to acknowledge those who have contributed in various ways to this fourth edition. First, the three reviewers of the third edition provided extremely helpful suggestions for updating and organizing this fourth edition. We also want to thank participants in workshops on qualitative research in different parts of the world who raised wonderful questions and struggled with activities related to conducting small pilot studies—all of which enabled us to sharpen our thinking and instruction. We also want to give special thanks to our doctoral students, who, although they may have taken a number of courses in qualitative research, challenged us to improve our mentoring and advising as they worked through the process. We have, in fact, drawn examples from a number of their dissertations to illustrate aspects of the process. Finally, a very special thanks goes to Anne Greenawalt, a doctoral student in the Penn State Adult Education program, for her assistance with a wide range of research, technical, and organizational tasks related to getting the manuscript ready for publication.

SHARAN B. MERRIAM
Athens, Georgia

ELIZABETH J. TISDELL
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

THE AUTHORS

Sharan B. Merriam is professor emerita of adult and continuing education at the University of Georgia in Athens, where her responsibilities included teaching graduate courses in adult education and qualitative research methods and supervising graduate student research. She received her B.A. degree (1965) in English literature from Drew University, her M.Ed. degree (1971) in English education from Ohio University, and her Ed.D. degree (1978) in adult education from Rutgers University. Before coming to the University of Georgia, she served on the faculties of Northern Illinois University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Merriam's main research and writing activities have focused on adult education, adult development and learning, and qualitative research methods. She has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference, the Qualitative Research in Education Conference at the University of Georgia, and the Commission of Professors of Adult Education. For five years she was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly*, the major research and theory journal in the field of adult education. She was also coeditor of a book series, *Professional Practices in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning*. She has won the Cyril O. Houle World Award for Literature in Adult Education for four different books. Various of her books have been translated into Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and French. Her most recent publications include *A Guide to Research for Educators and Trainers of Adults* (with Patricia Cranton, 2015), *Adult Learning* (with Laura Bierema, 2014), *Learning in Adulthood*, third edition (with Rosemary Caffarella and Lisa Baumgartner, 2007), *Non-Western Perspectives on Learning and Knowing* (2007), and *Third Update on Adult Learning Theory* (2008).

Based on her widespread contributions to the field of adult education, Merriam has been inducted into the International Adult and Continuing Education Hall of Fame and was the first to receive the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education's Career Achievement award. She regularly conducts workshops and seminars on adult learning and qualitative research throughout North America and overseas, including Brazil and countries in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. She has been a senior Fulbright scholar to Malaysia, and a distinguished visiting scholar to universities in South Korea and South Africa.

Elizabeth J. Tisdell is professor of adult education at Penn State University–Harrisburg and the coordinator of graduate programs in adult education. Her teaching responsibilities include facilitating graduate courses in adult education, spirituality and culture in the health and medical professions, and in qualitative research methods. She also supervises graduate student research.

Tisdell received her B.A. in mathematics from the University of Maine in 1977, an M.A. in religion from Fordham University in 1979, and an Ed.D. in adult education from the University of Georgia in 1992. Prior to joining the faculty at Penn State, she was associate professor of adult and continuing education at National-Louis University in Chicago and served on the faculty at Antioch University, Seattle. She worked as a campus minister for the Catholic Church from 1979 to 1989 at both Central Michigan University and Loyola University–New Orleans.

Tisdell's main research and writing activities have focused on spirituality and culture in adult and higher education, diversity issues in adult education and medical education, and qualitative research methods. She is the author of *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education* (Jossey-Bass, 2003). Her other scholarly works have appeared in numerous journals and edited books. Tisdell has served on steering committees for the annual North American Adult Education Research Conference, was the chair of the Commission of Professors of Adult Education from

2012 to 2014, and was coeditor of *Adult Education Quarterly* from 2006 to 2011. Tisdell enjoys exploring what is to be learned from spiritual pilgrimage, embodied in practices relating to yoga, music, and art, and from exploring both the wisdom in nature as well as the nature of wisdom.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

PART ONE

THE DESIGN OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Education, health, social work, administration, and other arenas of social activity are considered applied social sciences or fields of practice precisely because practitioners in these fields deal with the everyday concerns of people's lives. Having an interest in knowing more about one's practice, and indeed in *improving* one's practice, leads to asking researchable questions, some of which are best approached through a qualitative research design. In fact, we believe that research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making a difference in people's lives.

Engaging in systematic inquiry about your practice—doing research—involves choosing a study design that corresponds with your question; you should also consider whether the design is a comfortable match with your worldview, personality, and skills. It is thus important to understand the philosophical foundations underlying different types of research so that you can make informed decisions as to the choices available to you in designing and implementing a research study. The four chapters in Part One of this book provide the conceptual foundation for doing *qualitative* research and lay out some of the choices and decisions you will need to make in conducting a qualitative study.

The qualitative, interpretive, or naturalistic research paradigm defines the methods and techniques most suitable for collecting and analyzing data. Qualitative inquiry, which focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data. Humans are best suited for this task, especially because interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research. Chapter One explores the foundations of qualitative research, defines this mode of inquiry, and identifies its essential characteristics.

Although all of qualitative research holds a number of assumptions and characteristics in common, there are variations in the disciplinary base that a qualitative study might draw from, in how a qualitative study might be designed, and in what the intent of the study might be. Thus a qualitative ethnographic study that focuses on culture could be differentiated from a narrative life history study or from a study designed to build a substantive theory. Chapter Two differentiates among six major types of qualitative studies commonly found in applied fields of study.

As the field of qualitative research continues to develop and expand, we thought it useful to include a chapter that reviews designs wherein qualitative methods are combined with other orientations. Chapter Three reviews mixed methods, action research, critical, and arts based research.

Other considerations have to do with identifying the theoretical framework that forms the scaffolding or underlying structure of your study. Reviewing previous thinking and research found in the literature can help illuminate your framework, as well as shape the actual problem statement and purpose of the study. Further, how you select your sample is directly linked to the questions you ask and to how you have constructed the problem of your study. These considerations are discussed in detail, with illustrative examples, in Chapter Four.

The four chapters that make up Part One of this book are thus designed to orient you to the nature of qualitative research and common types of qualitative research, as well as how to frame your question or interest, state your research problem, and select a sample. Part One paves the way for subsequent chapters that focus on data collection and data analysis.

<div style="text-align:center">

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

</div>

This book is about qualitative research—what it is, and how to do it. But before we get into qualitative research, it's important to define what we mean by *research* itself. There are many definitions of research, but what they all have in common is the notion of inquiring into, or investigating something in a systematic manner. In everyday life we talk about "doing research" to inform our decisions and to decide on a particular course of action. For example, when it comes time to buy a new car, you might do some "research" by consulting *Consumer Reports* and a number of Internet sites that rate cars on quality, customer satisfaction, safety, and so on. All of this "research," in addition to test-driving several cars, will enable you to make your decision.

You as a reader probably found your way to this text because you have a more formal interest in research. Research is typically divided into the categories of *basic* and *applied.* Basic research is motivated by intellectual interest in a phenomenon and has as its goal the extension of knowledge. Although basic research may eventually inform practice, its primary purpose is to know more about a phenomenon. Al Gore, in his award-winning movie *An Inconvenient Truth,* shares quite a bit of basic research (such as the rate at which the polar ice caps have been melting) as evidence of global warming. This basic research of course has implications for what people might do to stem global warming.

Applied research is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline. Applied social science researchers

generally are interested in speaking to an audience different from that of basic researchers. They hope their work will be used by administrators and policymakers to improve the way things are done. For example, a public health researcher might undertake a study to find out how healthier school lunch programs are affecting childhood obesity. The findings of this study would then inform legislators revising the policy, as well as school dieticians and administrators whose responsibility it is to implement the policy.

There are many forms of applied research. Evaluation studies constitute one form of applied research common to many of us in fields of social practice. The difference between evaluation and research, which are both forms of systematic inquiry, lies in the questions asked, not in the methods used, for the methods in each are essentially the same. Evaluation research collects data or evidence on the worth or value of a program, process, or technique. Its main purpose is to establish a basis for decision making, "to make judgments about the program, improve program effectiveness, and/or inform decisions about future programming" (Patton, 2015, p. 18). Other common forms of applied research are action research and appreciative inquiry, both of which focus on facilitating change. The goal of action research is to address a specific *problem* in a practice-based setting, such as a classroom, a workplace, a program, or an organization (Herr & Anderson, 2015). By contrast, appreciative inquiry is often used in organizational settings to tell stories of what is positive or appreciated and effective in those organizations, to facilitate innovation (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) rather than focusing on problems. Both of these kinds of research typically involve the participants in the research process, thus blurring the distinction between change processes and research. Further, while some training in research is helpful, both action research and appreciative inquiry are often conducted by people who are interested in facilitating change in their work, community, or family. They decide to "experiment" with the situation, while documenting what happens when trying a new strategy or intervention. Typically, many interventions or strategies are implemented by participants over time. The results and the unfolding process are continually documented, making apparent the process of finding either the most effective solutions to practice-based problems (action

research) or what innovations arise when organizations focus on sharing positive appreciative stories among its members (appreciative inquiry).

In its broadest sense, research is a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process. We can engage in this process to contribute to the knowledge base in a field (pure research), improve the practice of a particular discipline (applied research), assess the value of something (evaluation research), or address a particular, localized problem (action research).

THE NATURE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Most people know what an experiment is or what a survey is. We might know someone in a weight loss experiment in which some use diet alone, some use diet and exercise, and others use diet, exercise, and an appetite suppressant. This is an experiment to see which "treatment" results in the most weight loss. Randomly dividing participants into three groups will test which treatment has brought about the most improvement. Surveys are also familiar to us, as when we are stopped in the shopping mall and asked to respond to some survey questions about products we use, movies we've seen, and so on. Survey research describes "what is"; that is, how variables are distributed across a population or phenomenon. For example, we might be interested in who is likely to watch which television shows and their age, race, gender, level of education, and occupation.

There are a number of variations on these designs, but basically experimental approaches try to determine the cause of events and to predict similar events in the future. Survey or descriptive designs are intended to systematically describe the facts and characteristics of a given phenomenon or the relationships between events and phenomena. Sometimes these designs are grouped together and labeled "quantitative" because the focus is on how much or how many, and results are usually presented in numerical form.

Rather than determining cause and effect, predicting, or describing the distribution of some attribute among a population, we might be interested in uncovering the meaning of a

phenomenon for those involved. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences. For example, rather than studying retired adults to find out the percentage and characteristics of those who take on part-time jobs after retirement, which could be done through a survey, we might be more interested in how people adjust to retirement, how they think about this phase of their lives, the process they engaged in when moving from full-time work to retirement, and so on. These questions are about *understanding* their experiences and would call for a qualitative design. While Braun and Clarke's (2013) distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is somewhat simplified, they write that "the most basic definition of qualitative research is that it uses *words* as **data** . . . collected and analyzed in all sorts of ways. Quantitative research, in contrast, uses *numbers* as data and analyzes them using statistical techniques" (pp. 3–4, emphasis in original).

WHERE DOES QUALITATIVE RESEARCH COME FROM?

Decades before what we now call "qualitative research" or "qualitative inquiry" became popular, anthropologists and sociologists were asking questions about people's lives, the social and cultural contexts in which they lived, the ways in which they understood their worlds, and so on. Anthropologists and sociologists went into "the field," whether it was a village in Africa or a city in the United States, observed what was going on, interviewed people in these settings, and collected and analyzed artifacts and personal and public documents relevant to understanding what they were studying. The written accounts of these studies were qualitative in nature. Bogdan and Biklen (2011) point out that Chicago sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s emphasized "the intersection of social context and biography" that lies at "the roots of contemporary descriptions of qualitative research as *holistic*" (p. 9).

> In addition, especially in the life histories Chicago School sociologists produced, the importance of seeing the world from the perspective of those who were seldom listened to—the criminal,