

# An Overview of Qualitative Methods

# Why Do I Need to Know About Research and Research Methods?

As a graduate student...

- To be able to read and understand the empirical literature in your field; to become a critical consumer of information.

# Why Do I Need to Know About Research and Research Methods?

As a (future) practitioner...

- To be able to intelligently participate in research projects, evaluations, and studies undertaken by your organization.

# Why Do I Need to Know About Research and Research Methods?

As an educated citizen ...

- To understand the difference between scientifically acquired knowledge and other kinds of information.

# What's the Difference Between “Method” and “Methodology”?

## Method:

- Techniques for gathering evidence
- The various ways of proceeding in gathering information

## Methodology:

- The underlying theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed, often influenced by discipline

Sandra Harding, “Is There a Feminist Method?”, pg. 2-3.

# Choosing a Method

- What method(s) will help you answer your research question(s)
- Methodology guides application
- Epistemology guides analysis
- All must include “rigor”

# An Overview of Qualitative Research Methods

## **Qualitative – Descriptive**

- Ethnography
- Case Study
- Focus Groups
- Discourse/Text Analysis
- Interviews

# Ethnographies

## Positive Benefits

- + Observational field work done in the actual context being studied
- + Focus on how individuals interrelate in their own environment (and the influence of this environment)

# Ethnographies

## Negative Benefits

- Difficult to interpret/analyze
- Time consuming/expensive
- Can influence subject behavior

# Case Studies

## Positive Benefits

- + Focus is on individual or small group
- + Able to conduct a comprehensive analysis from a comparison of cases
- + Allows for identification of variables or phenomenon to be studied

# Case Studies

## Negative Benefits

- Time consuming
- Depth rather than breadth
- Not necessarily representative

# Focus Groups

## Positive

- + Aid in understanding audience, group, users
- + Small group interaction more than individual response
- + Helps identify and fill gaps in current knowledge re: perceptions, attitudes, feelings, etc.

# Focus Groups

## Negative Benefits

- Does not give statistics
- Marketing tools seen as “suspect”
- Analysis subjective

# Discourse/Text Analysis

## Positive

- + Examines actual discourse produced for a particular purpose (job, school)
- + Helps in understanding of context, production, audience, and text
- + Schedule for analysis not demanding

# Discourse/Text Analysis

## Negative

- Labor intensive
- Categories often fluid, making analysis difficult

# Interviews

## Positive

- + Enables the interviewer to establish rapport with the respondent
- + Allows the interviewer to observe as well as listen
- + Permits more complex questions to be asked than in other types of data collection

# Interviews

## Negative

- Labor intensive to produce results
- May be leading
- Bias of the questioner

# Other Qualitative Methods

- Cultural Studies
- Feminist
- Performance
- Visual Analysis
- Teacher Research
- Science  
Technology Studies
- Narrative
- Hermeneutics
- Performance
- Grounded Theory
- Phenomenological  
Theory
- Actor-network  
Theory

# What Makes Research Good?

- Validity
- Reliability
- Replicability
- Consistent application/analysis
- “Trustworthiness”
- Rigor

# Validity in Research

- Refers to whether the research actually measures what it says it'll measure. Validity is the strength of our conclusions, inferences or propositions.
  - **Internal Validity:** the difference in the dependent variable is actually a result of the independent variable
  - **External Validity:** the results of the study are generalizable to other groups and environments outside the experimental setting
  - **Conclusion Validity:** we can identify a relationship between treatment and observed outcome
  - **Construct Validity:** we can generalize our conceptualized treatment and outcomes to broader constructs of the same concepts

# Reliability in Research

The consistency of a measurement, or the degree to which an instrument measures the same way each time it is used under the same condition with the same subjects. In short, it is the repeatability of your measurement. A measure is considered reliable if a person's score on the same test given twice is similar. It is important to remember that reliability is not measured, it is estimated.  
Measured by test/retest and internal consistency.

# Validity and Reliability

The relationship between reliability and validity is a fairly simple one to understand: a measurement can be reliable, but not valid. However, a measurement must first be reliable before it can be valid. Thus reliability is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of validity. In other words, a measurement may consistently assess a phenomena (or outcome), but unless that measurement tests what you want it to, it is not valid.

# Rigor in Research

- Validity and Reliability in conducting research
- Adequate presentation of findings: consistency, trustworthiness
- Appropriate representation of study for a particular field: disciplinary rigor
- Rhetorical Rigor: how you represent your research for a particular audience

# Key Considerations to Design Your Research Approach

- What question do you want to answer?
- For what purposes is the research being done? i.e., what do you want to be able to do or decide as a result of the research?
- Who are the audiences for the information from the research, e.g., teachers, students, other researchers, members of a disciplinary community, corporate entities, etc.?
- From what sources should the information be collected, e.g., students, teachers, targeted groups, certain documentation, etc.?

# Key Considerations to Design Your Research Approach

- What kinds of information are needed to make the decisions you need to make and/or to enlighten your intended audiences, e.g., do you need information to really understand a process, the students who engage in a process, strengths and weaknesses of a curriculum or program, benefits to students or institution or agency, how aspect of a program are problematic, etc.?

# Key Considerations to Design Your Research Approach

- How can that information be collected in a reasonable fashion, e.g., questionnaires, interviews, examining documentation, observing staff and/or clients in the program, conducting focus groups among staff and/or students, etc?
- How accurate will this information be?
- When is the information needed (so, by when must it be collected)?
- What resources are available to collect the information?
- How will this information be analyzed?