

*QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND RESEARCH DESIGN*

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A Book Review

Presented to

Dr. David Sills

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 86110

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by

Mark David Harris

[Goodmedicine1@verizon.net](mailto:Goodmedicine1@verizon.net)

May 15, 2015

[Creswell, John W. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Inc, 2013.]

## **Introduction**

John W. Creswell's *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* is a comprehensive look at qualitative, as opposed to quantitative, research in the academic setting. A professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln Campus, Creswell has written dozens of books and articles on how investigators can most effectively do such research. Judging from the reviews on Amazon and other websites, his work is generally well regarded in the field.

## **Summary**

Creswell begins by identifying the five basic types of qualitative studies including narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. He then investigates an area that many researchers do not consider; their own beliefs and assumptions, and how that affects their research. For example, as a physician and medical investigator I am well versed in quantitative research. I am comfortable with study blinding, statistical analysis, and the need to exclude the researchers as much as possible from the study to avoid confounding the findings. This is precisely what Creswell rejects in qualitative studies. He then discusses issues of ontology, epistemology, and axiology, and concludes with some specialized viewpoints in qualitative research, such as social justice.

Creswell next tackles how to design a qualitative study, contrasting it with common designs of a quantitative study. Participants are typically engaged in their natural setting, rather than someplace unfamiliar. In qualitative studies, researchers are themselves instruments of data collection, so they collect multiple types of data using each of their senses, and are explicit about how their background colors their interpretation of the study. They use inductive and deductive methods of reasoning, and seek to understand how the subjects understand their own activities. Since there are so many variables, the design of qualitative studies evolves over time to meet the

needs of the participants, and the overall perspective of each investigation is holistic, attempting to understand all of the parts and the whole of the situation. Creswell concludes chapter three by describing when to use a qualitative study, the process, and ethical considerations.

Narrative studies accomplish their goals by exploring the individual experiences of one or a few people and arranging them into a chronology of stories (112). Phenomenological studies investigate the reactions of a group of people to a similar situation, such as a group of women battling breast cancer (114). Grounded theory research uses experiences of individuals in a group to try to develop theories about why they do something (117). For example, an investigator might develop a study to ascertain why people in group A quit smoking while those in group B tried but could not. An ethnography attempts to understand the culture of a whole people group (118), while a case study examines a case or group of cases of some outcome, such as unemployment, and tries to identify common themes (120).

Whether quantitative or qualitative, studies are introduced through a problem statement. The researchers review the literature, discover where knowledge is lacking in the field, identify the problem, and then write a purpose statement to justify the need for the study.

Once the study is designed and approved by the institutional review board, it is time to gather data. Creswell addresses data collection from beginning to end. The first step is to pick a site or individual, and then get help from insiders to gain access to and rapport with the group. The next step is to select a sample of respondents that will help answer the question posed by the study. Investigators sometimes pick respondents that are average in the study group while other times they pick individuals who are extraordinary. Still other times they pick whoever seems the most informative at the time, and add to their list throughout the study. Forms of data include observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials.

Data are only worthwhile once they are analyzed. Once collection is done, researchers must review the raw data several times to get the feeling for it. What is the general flow, what are the themes, and does anything seem out of place? Then data must be organized into logical units, such as time periods or themes. As analysis continues the investigator subdivides data into

categories and organizes it taxonomically. From these analyses interpretations begin to appear. Throughout the process the data are graphically represented in tables, matrices or some other form. Computers can be very useful in storing, coding and analyzing qualitative information.

Creswell then explores how to write the paper. Authors must keep in mind their personal interpretations that might bias the results and the audience for which they write. Quotes, whether short and eye-catching, embedded in the text, or longer and more complex can provide credibility. Quantitative research has a common structure, beginning with the introduction which includes the study hypothesis and the literature view. Then follows the methods section, results and discussion. Each type of qualitative study has a different writing structure. For example, narratives are often chronological while phenomenological studies are often thematic. Ethnographies may be realist tales, confessional tales, or impressionistic tales.

Readers, especially academics, always want to know how much they can trust any study that they read. In quantitative research, internal validity asks if the results of the study are accurate for those in the study and external validity ask if the results are generalizable to people outside the study. Reliability is a measure of how consistent the results are and is sometimes termed reproducibility. Objectivity considers how much unintentional (or intentional) researcher bias is present.

While some qualitative studies use similar evaluation methods, many need a different set of methods. Triangulation seeks to compare information from different sources to ascertain what is most accurate. Intercoder agreement checks whether different investigators find similar things in data sets. Both speak to the accuracy of the findings. The last evaluative questions that Creswell posits are first, does the work make a substantive contribution, second does it have aesthetic merit, third, is the author reflexive, and fourth, does the piece move him (257).

### **Response**

Creswell's introduction is effective, and its greatest strength, as is true throughout the work, is the many examples to which he refers (8-10). The discussion of philosophical

frameworks is useful to help researchers identify how they, and other authors, see the world. Notably, his prose seems to favor an understanding of reality that denies the existence of reality, at least in the objective sense. His comments on power in relationships imply a view that power disparities are inherently objectionable.

Having nursed on the mother's milk of quantitative studies in medicine, Creswell's summary of the characteristics of qualitative studies was enlightening. The need for qualitative studies in medicine is obvious, because as Einstein famously quipped, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."<sup>1</sup> Hence the author's description of when to do such studies, how to design them, and what to watch for ethically leaves the reader prepared to begin.

Creswell's chapters defining and illustrating the five types of qualitative studies comprise the core of the book. Though challenging to understand at times, and burdened with wordiness and passive voice, the reader comes away with a basic knowledge of the topic. The examples in the appendices help.

Once the author identifies and defines the types of studies, he reveals how each part of the project should be done for each type of study. For example, chapter 6 tells readers how to introduce and focus a narrative study, as well as the other types. Chapter 7 reveals how to collect data for a phenomenological study, as well as the other types. Chapter 8 instructs how to analyze and represent data for an ethnography, and so on. This discussion is very helpful for neophytes crossing the threshold into the bewildering world of qualitative studies.

The discussions on data collection and data analysis are sound the section on computer data analysis was less useful. The portion on writing the paper was satisfactory.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein, "The Quotations Page", accessed March 6, 2015, <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/26950.html>.

## **Conclusion**

Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design is a valuable primer for anyone who wishes to do qualitative research. It provides a nearly step by step description of how to design the study and is also strong on considering the author's preconceptions. Other books, such as Spratley's Participant Observation and The Ethnographic Interview are better for the details. Together, Creswell and Spratley provide a firm foundation for the beginning ethnographer.