Mid-term for ETAP 777-13 Fall

Dan Tao

1. *What have you learned about when qualitative research is an appropriate method for a study? What are some of the main approaches to a qualitative study according to Creswell? What kinds of research questions might be asked for some of the different approaches?*

According to the characteristics of qualitative research, Creswell (2013, pp. 47-48) summarized almost all the possible situations in which a researcher chooses a qualitative method to conduct their research. First of all, researchers conduct qualitative research when they need to address research questions requiring an exploration or a detailed understanding of an issue they are interested in. In that case, the requirements from central questions go beyond descriptions of trends or relationships among variables. Qualitative research methods would also be a better choice when researchers want to understand the contexts or settings in which participants in a study address a problem or an issue. When choosing a qualitative method, researchers don’t need to separate participants’ stories from where they are located. In addition, researchers choose qualitative methods when they rely more on views of participants rather than the pre-conceived meanings brought to the research by researchers from literature, which means researchers empower participants to share their stories and hear participants’ voices. Researchers also use a qualitative research when there is a lack of theories or theoretical models to explain what they are interested in. In that case, researchers would generate a theory or improve existing theories to better understand the individuals, events, processes, or actions. In order to explain the mechanisms or linkages in causal theories or models that quantitative research methods cannot achieve, researchers might use qualitative research methods as a follow-up. Finally, researchers prefer qualitative research methods to quantitative research methods when they want to write in a literary, flexible style that conveys stories and meanings without restrictions of formal academic structures of writing. Meanwhile, researchers also need to pay attention to whom their audience are when choosing their methods. If all their audience are more familiar with qualitative research methods, it might be much easier to communicate what they are doing to their audience when they choose qualitative research methods.

Generally speaking, there are five common qualitative research methods in educational research: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. Researchers use narrative research to explore the life of one or two individuals, collect data through the collection of their stories and write narratives about their experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). Different from other qualitative research methods, researchers typically focus on one or two individuals and analyze data for “stories” in a chronology way. A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Researchers who use phenomenology focus on a phenomenon experienced by a group of individuals. The purpose of phenomenology is to describe the essence of the share experience. Grounded Theory studies go beyond description of the common experiences for a group of people to generate or discover a theory or theoretical model for a process, an action, or an interaction (Creswell, 2013, p. 83). A central feature of grounded theory is that the final theoretical explanation is generated or grounded in data from participants who have experienced the process, action, or interaction rather than from existing literature. Researchers analyze data through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, which are peculiar to grounded theory research. Ethnographic research focuses on an entire culture-sharing group to describe and interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language (Creswell, 2013, p. 90). The purpose of ethnographic research is to develop a complex and complete description about how a culture-sharing group works through investigating patterns of the group. Case study research is a type of design in which researchers explore a real-life, contemporary case or multiple cases over time, through detailed, in-depth data collecting involving multiple sources of information, and report a case description and case themes (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). The goal of case study is to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a case or multiple cases, which could be an event, a program, an activity, or more than one individual.

Qualitative research questions are open-ended, evolving, and non-directional (Creswell, 2013, p. 138). Because qualitative research are exploration-oriented, they usually start with a word like “what” or “how” rather than “why”. Different qualitative research approaches address different research questions. According to the characteristics of each qualitative research approach, ethnographical research typically address descriptive questions in cultures (e.g., what are the core values of the straight edge movement, and how do the members construct and understand their subjective experiences of being part of the subculture? ); grounded theory research answers process questions (e.g., what behavioral process theory explains the integration of physical activity into the lifestyle of 15 African American women?); phenomenological studies focus on meaning questions (e.g., what meaning do 41 men and 17 women with a diagnosis of AIDS ascribe to their illness?) (Creswell, 2013, p. 139).

A very strong explanation, but more specific citaions would have strengthened. Some problems with language.

1. *As the chapter authors in Anfara and Mertz made clear, theory is a critical and integral part of the research process. Discuss the ways in which theory plays a role in that process and how it strengthens findings and conclusions.*

A useful theory tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon, which gives researchers new insights and broadens their understanding of the phenomenon (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xvii). As noted in the introduction section (Anfara& Mertz, 2006, p. xiv), “To understand a theory is to travel into someone else’ mind and become able to perceive reality as that person does.” A theory provides researchers a different lens to look at complicated phenomenon. Each lens can provide a reasoned and sensible explanation of the phenomenon being studied (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xviii).

Even though there is no clear agreement made in qualitative research about the role and significance of theory and theoretical framework, Anfara and Mertz believe that it plays a key role in framing and conducting almost every aspect of the research. In the first chapter, Henstrand elaborated how theory contributed to the design, data gathering, and analysis of her study (pp.15-17). With that framework, Henstrand changed her original assumptions about her role and the way to design her study. She used that model to look for the operating standards that were being revealed by the participants. The cultural framework also helped her to manage the subjectivity of her research role as teacher and stepped into a researcher, which finally improved the reliability of the study. In chapter 2, Merriam described how Mezirow’s development theory of transformational learning structured all aspects of her study (p. 36). All of their research questions were derived from that framework. The transformative framework not only helped to shape the research questions to make the inquiry manageable and coherent, but also informed the research methodology. The liminality framework in Bettis and Mills’ research was used to make sense of the data, to provide some coherent explanation for why people were doing or saying what they were doing or saying (pp. 68-70). Karpiak provide detailed explanation about how Chaos and Complexity framework influenced his study design, data analysis, research findings as well as interpretations (pp. 100-102). He pointed out the framework supported his use of interview methods that would allow individuals to determine the direction, content, and emotional tone of the interview.

One important way that theories or theoretical frameworks help to strengthen findings and conclusions is through making connection with them with literature from which the theories or theoretical frameworks were derived. We can find examples in Merriam and Karpiak’s research. Also, theories or theoretical frameworks in most research examples showed the function in informing research design, which helps to improve the validity and reliability of research design.

A good answer that has better support. You also needed to mention how theory situates research within a larger scholarly conversation.

1. *What are the chief characteristics of grounded theory? When might it be appropriate to use a grounded theory approach? Finally, what parts of the grounded theory process might be useful to qualitative researchers conducting other kinds of research?*

Grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2). To put it simply, it is a method for generating theories through systematically data collection and analysis. When compared with other popular approaches in qualitative research, the unit of analysis can be served as a key feature to distinguish grounded theory from other approaches. In grounded theory, researchers usually **focus on a process, an action, or an interaction** involving many individuals, from which they will generate a general explanation (Creswell, 2013, p. 83), whereas other qualitative research often lay an emphasis on individuals or event. For example, narrative research and phenomenology study one or more individuals; ethnography research is more interested in a group that shares the same culture; case study cares more about an event, a program, an activity or a group.

According to Charmaz, the defining characteristics of grounded theory can be summarized in four aspects. First of all, grounded theory researchers **stays with data closely at all times** and conduct **early theoretical analyses** at the beginning of their research (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). Researchers collect and analyze data simultaneously rather than waiting until all data are collected, which helps them to shape the data collection to inform emerging analysis and guide their further data collection based on analysis results. This characteristic also suggests the non-linear feature of grounded theory research. In addition, grounded theory researchers **construct analytic codes and categories from data**, not from preconceived theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 3-4). The goal of grounded theory research is to generate a theoretical explanation that fit the problem, which is informed by analytical codes and categories developed through the research process. To ensure the uniqueness of the explanation and avoid influence from existing theories, researchers develop analytical codes and categories from the data themselves. Another central characteristic of grounded theory is the **constant comparison of data** with emerging categories in the coding stage (Charmaz, 2006, p. 3). In order to ‘ground’ categories from the data, the process of constructing theoretical categories is a constant comparative procedure, which might include comparing comparison between incidents, categories and subcategories within the data. Finally, grounded theory researchers conduct **theoretical sampling** to gather more dada toward theory construction, not for population representativeness (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 96-101). Charmaz advocates gathering rich-detailed and full-data and placing them in their relevant situational and social contexts. In grounded theory research, researchers choose data that will yield useful information in developing theoretical categories and finally in generating a theory. In that case, researchers seek statements, events, or cases that will illuminate their categories (Charmaz, 2006, p. 103).

Considering the purpose and characteristics of grounded theory, researchers usually use this approach when they cannot find adequate theories or theoretical models to explain or understand a process, an action or an interaction (Crewell, 2012, p. 88). One possible situation is that there is no theory in the existing literature that can address the research question. The other situation is that there are related theories or models in literature. However, existent theories or models don’t fit the characteristics of the samples researchers interested in well; or they are incomplete to make a sound explanation. In those cases, the researchers have no choice but to develop one by themselves. Meanwhile, researchers interested in this approach should also be aware that grounded theory is more common in large-scale research conducted by experienced researchers. Therefore, this approach might not suitable for small projects or new qualitative researchers (e.g., doctoral dissertation).

Even though not all qualitative research include an explicit explanation construction, data analysis in grounded theory provides researchers a unique way to develop an analytic edge to their work (Charmaz, 2006, p. xii). No matter which qualitative approaches the researchers choose, the final goal is to develop a complex and detailed understanding, to tell a story about the individuals or cases they are interested in. The process of data analysis in grounded theory (open coding, axial coding and selective coding) supplies a great way to inform compelling description about what is happening in the scene. Just as Charmaz (2006, p. xii) has pointed out in the introduction section, grounded theory methods can help researchers make their work more insightful and incisive.

Very strong and well supported answer

1. *What are some of the key characteristics of narrative methods, according to Riessman, and how does it differ from other approaches such as grounded theory? What are some of the advantages this approach offers?*

First of all, participants in narrative research are no longer viewed as given or natural, they must construct their own identities about who they are and how they want to be known when telling their own experiences (Riessman, 2008, p. 7). Therefore, participants construct both preferred narratives about themselves and stories about their experiences in the process. Another key feature of narrative methods is that narrative researchers collect individual stories, which emerges through the interaction or dialogue of the researcher and the participants. As Riessman (2008, p.50) has noted, researchers critically shape the stories participants choose to tell through their presence, by listening and questioning in particular ways. The stories are actually co-constructed by the researchers and the participants. In this way, the potential gap between the narrative told and narrative reported can be effectively lessened. In addition, narrative stories often contain turning points or specific tensions or interruptions that are highlighted by the researchers in re-telling the stories told by participants (Riessman, 2008, pp. 15-16). Moreover, narrative inquiry focuses on stories occur within particular places and settings (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). In narrative research, researchers investigate particular actors, in particular social places at particular times. Therefore, the context in which individual stories are located becomes especially important for the researchers to interpret the individual experience. Besides, there are different ways to analyze narrative stories: researchers can conduct thematic analysis with a focus on what participants have said (Riessman, 2008. P. 53); or they can focus on the structure of the telling of the story through structural analysis (Riessamn, 2008, p. 77).

Narrative research is different from other qualitative research approaches in many aspects, including its purpose, type of problem, unit of analysis, data analysis strategies and final research report (Creswell, 2013, pp. 98-106). When compared with grounded theory research, we can find a lot of differences between them. First of all, they have different focuses. Narrative research explores the life of an individual by developing narratives about stories told by the participants. However, grounded theory studies are more interested in developing a theoretical explanation grounded from the data collected in the research. In addition, narrative researchers usually study one or more individuals. While grounded theory research focus on a process, an action, or an interaction involving many individuals (Creswell, 2013, p. 104). Moreover, they use different data analysis strategies. In narrative research, in order to develop a narrative about stories of individual’s life, researchers can conduct thematic analysis with a focus on what participants have said (Riessman, 2008. P. 53); or they can focus on the structure of the telling of the story through structural analysis (Riessamn, 2008, p. 77). Meanwhile, among those different analysis strategies, prior theories usually serve as a resource for interpretation of spoken and written narratives. While in grounded theory research, researchers construct analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 3-4). Researchers in grounded theory research analyze data through open coding, axial coding and selective coding.

As a distinct form of qualitative research methodology, narrative research has some advantages when compared with other qualitative research approaches. First of all, narrative research can provide a holistic picture of a single individual or the lives of a small numbers of individuals with detailed information (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). Narratives are open to continuous interpretations at different times by different people. Through different analysis strategies, researchers may reveal information that could not easily be discerned on the surface. Moreover, researchers critically shape the stories participants choose to tell through their presence, by listening and questioning in particular ways (Riessman, 2008, p. 50). The benefits of this collaboration lie in two ways. On the one hand, researchers co-constructed the stories with participants, which helps researchers to restorying participants’ experience and finally lessen the gap between them. On the other hand, by conducting narrative studies, researchers can establish a close bond with the participants, which helps to make connections between research and practice.

Very clear and well-supported answer

Dan, you’ve constructed a very strong set of answers overall. The second two answers are better than the first two in terms of support.

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**References:**

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