Qualitative Research

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe how a researcher may conduct a basic

qualitative research. This paper deals specifically with research of learning, older

adults, and in a rural area. This paper became the foundation for the research of

my dissertation. I discuss the sample and the criteria for the sample. I also

describe the sources of information for the study – especially that of interviews,

observations and documents.

How to Conduct General Qualitative Research

The Nature of Sampling in Qualitative Research

The sample in qualitative research is the result of a careful, complicated, and collaborative process. Sample selection is a pivotal part of the research because the sample becomes the data and addresses the particular problem of this research. The theoretical framework is the philosophical foundation for the overall study, and the sample provides resources to address this framework (Merriam, 1998). The purpose of this study is to understand the role of SDL in late life adjustment. The study draws on literature of adult education, SDL, gerontology, and adult development; therefore, the sample will likewise reflect components of these perspectives (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

This research is a 'basic qualitative study.' This is a specific research project to "seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and world views of the people involved" (Merriam, 1998, p.11). Data will be collected primarily through interviews, but will include observations and documents. The findings of this research will become a combination of description and analysis. This analysis is based on theoretical frame made obvious through the study as well as recurring patterns found in the interview data (Merriam).

The sample is often one of the more distinguishable aspects of qualitative research. Quantitative analysis contains large, random samples, whereas qualitative inquiry contains small, purposely selected samples. Rather than concerns with generalizations, this is an attempt to capture information-rich cases that will supply rich and thick data (Patton, 1990).

Non-probabilistic sampling will occur in order to capture the essence of this study (Merriam, 1998). This research will describe phenomenology rather than logic, quality of experience rather than quantity. These findings will describe, discover, and understand, rather than predict, control, or test. As a result of this investigation the researcher desires to see that which evolves and emerges rather than that which is structured or predetermined. The sample will be purposefully chosen rather than random or representative. The researcher will be personally involved with the research and will induct, rather than statistically deduct. Findings will be rich expressive descriptions rather than precise numbers (Merriam).

In addition to purposive or criterion sampling, snowball or chain sampling will be incorporated by locating key informants. This occurs often by asking those who are aware of their community: "Do you know someone that is an active older adult, 75 or over, who would be interested in participating in this research? Whom should I talk to?" This may lead to opportunistic sampling and fieldwork 'on the spot' decisions to take advantage of new opportunities during data collection (Patton, 1990). Some studies may be based on convenience sampling, this at times may be a necessity, but it also may draw an unusually large number of samples from university areas. There are no rules for sample size in qualitative research; more important is the location of information rich cases (Patton, 1990).

Criteria used in selecting the sample

In order to arrive at a sample that has been purposively chosen, the researcher must have a set of criteria. This criterion creates a list of important attributes for the sample based on the purpose of the study and its theoretical lens (Merriam, 1998). Like a

coach carefully crafting a team by scouting for specific recruits, the researcher should be diligent to have a sample that reflects the purpose of the study.

There are various types of purposeful sampling. This study will employ 'typical' sampling, one that is selected because it reflects an average person of the phenomenon. For example, this study will reflect the day to day learning in older adults, rather than looking at a phenomenal or unique case. Also network sampling will be employed to help identify candidates for this study. The researcher will ask for recommendations from the participants for others who may be interested (Merriam, 1998).

However, in some ways 'theoretical sampling' will also occur. The researcher begins with an initial sample, yet the data may lead the investigator to the next document or person to be interviewed. This is an evolving process guided by the emerging theory and analysis will occur simultaneously with this process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998).

Similarly Patton (1990) discusses there may not be concrete rules how to focus the study. A knowledge of the literature will help, but more important will be for the researcher to disclose what has occurred in this study (Seidman, 1998) Leaving an audit trail enables the reader to arrive at his or her own decision concerning the veracity of the study. Regardless, there are always tradeoffs among the decisions, yet often these choices are not between good and bad, but from alternatives all of which have merit (Patton).

The sample of this study will contain older adults that are active, live in rural Georgia, represent a diverse population, have some evidence of self-directed learning and late life adjustment.

Age.

Books that describe the older adult are full of interesting and often contradictory descriptions of age. Older adults may be characterized by a number of categories and descriptions; also the ages for these descriptions may change from author to author. For example, the young -old adult category may range from 55 – 70 and someone 70, 75, even 80 may appear well and healthy, yet be placed in the oldest-old category (Feldman, 2000). Literature often defines age categories in increments of 10, starting with 55, 65, 75, and 85 (Krout & Coward, 1998; Yntema, 1999). For a sample of older adults, this particular study will include adults that are at least 75 years old and older. For example, the age 75 is often a category used, in "The New Strategist", as a time when there is often a transition from young – old to middle or oldest - old (Yntema). The age will be specified for each person.

Studies focused on older adults specify various ages in the samples, these studies have samples that start at age 63 (Long & Smith, 1989), 60 (Brockett, 1985, 1987), 55 (Lamdin, 1997), and 40 (Gregg, 1996). For example, Lamdin's (1997) study has participants from age 55 to 96. The purpose of this study is to focus on older adults that are experiencing late life adjustment. With some of the recent demographic changes, people are living longer and healthier, and many people are not experiencing late life adjustments until the age of 70 (Quadagno, 1999). The young-old category (55 - 65), and maybe even middle –old (65-75) category, is becoming stronger and healthier. Therefore, this sample will begin with the age of 75. Neikrug et al. (1995) expressed that studies that specify adults in the 60's should not be considered older adults. With increased health

and medical advances, many of these adults are experiencing the continuation of the middle age (Peck, 1956).

Active Older Adult.

The term active older adult can have varieties of meanings. If questioned, the researcher will state that an active older person is one who can continue to perform the activities of daily living (ADL). The activities of daily living is a general term used in gerontology to delineate between people who can continue to carry out the activities of daily living, such as bathing, grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning (Quadagno, 1999). Although fitness magazines detail remarkable physical feats of older adults, this study will reflect the typical active older adult. Research could be too tedious and take the findings into another direction, albeit an interesting one, with older adults that cannot perform activities of daily living. Neikrug et al.'s (1995) research focused on older adults (80 and above) and delineated the sample would be healthy. Siegenthaler and Thomas (2001) were interested in mentally alert older adults that played golf. Neither study detailed how they surmised mentally alert or healthy; activities of daily living are compatible with this study.

Rural.

Although there has been some research on rural older adults (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), the majority of research is focused on samples within cities and university towns (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Jensen, 1999; Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Lamdin, 1997) or senior centers (Brockett, 1985, 1987; Cusak, 1996; Long & Smith, 1989; Neikrug et al. 1995; Pevoto, cited in Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991;Yamanda, 1994).

Even more alarming is the seemingly lack of recognition of the locale of the sample and its influence on the results.

The rural population may be more resourceful than people that dwell near cities. Residents who live in small towns may depend on themselves and one another to provide learning or entertainment (McLaughlin & Jensen, 1998). This creativity, innovation, and personal resourcefulness are more evident when typical resources are not available. Leean and Sisco (as cited in Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991) focused on SDL in rural adults in Vermont with less than twelve years of formal education. They found that SDL occurs in non-rational means, such as when one is alone and in everyday life. The nuances of living in a rural area may be an overlooked aspect of SDL.

This will be a sample comprised of older adults that live in rural areas, and will match the demographic of rural Georgia. Varieties of definitions of rural can confuse the issue. There are 8 million older adults that live in rural areas in the USA (Krout & Coward, 1998). Rather than attempting to delineate among the myriad of definitions and demographic issues from metropolitan rural farm to nonmetropolitan rural nonfarm (Krout & Coward), I will limit this sample to participants that live in a county where the total population is 30,000 or less. The state of Georgia will be incorporated, it is the home of the University of Georgia as well as the financial base for this school. The researcher is a native of rural South Georgia.

Diversity.

This sample will include the various races in Georgia. One of the main criticisms of research in SDL is its lack of diverse samples (Brookfield, 1985). This will be an attempt to represent the variety of the population of the State of Georgia of 75 year olds.

In 1996, the state of Georgia had a total population of 7,874,792. There are a total of 350,660 that are 75 and older. Out of this number, 279,113 are White (79.6%), 65,967 are Black (18.8%), 565 are Native American (.2%), 1,661 are Asian (.5%), and 3,354 are Hispanic (1%) (Yntema, 1999). Because of this there will be an overt attempt to have a diverse sample with one black female, one black male, two white females, two white males, one Asian female, one Hispanic female, and one Native American female.

Various qualitative studies have used different strategies for the sample. Jensen's (1999) dissertation went against the demographics of older adults by having five men and two women participate. Long and Zoller-Hodges (1995) felt that having all women in their study presented a more reliable finding since there were no gender differences. However, the 12 women who participated in the study were from five different Elderhostel programs.

Kroth and Boverie's (2000) study of five older adults comprised three women and two men. This diverse sample of five included two white, one African American, one Hispanic and one Asian. They purposely chose this diverse group that had been recommended by a key informant.

Self-Directed Learning.

The purpose of the study is to understand how older adults incorporate SDL with late life adjustment. Two assumptions will be made, that late life adjustments are occurring (Feldman, 2000), and that SDL is occurring (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991). Within the first interview both should be obvious, if not, then this person will be dropped from the study, or the focus of the study may shift. The researcher will be looking for a purposeful sample that represents SDL and late life adjustment.

Similar to Sear's study (as cited in Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991), in order for someone to be in this study, they must communicate during the first interview a personal learning activity of 10 hours within the year of the interview. This 10-hour must be self-planned and self-organized learning primarily on one's own. Although Tough (1971) used seven hours, Lamdin (1997) felt by using 10 hours, this helped to eliminate questionable situations such as learning how to work a VCR or some hobby. Personally chosen classes, groups, or lectures can count as SDL. Yet if someone decides to attend a program like Elderhostel because of an invitation of a friend, this would not count.

The researcher is looking for an expression of personal learning motivated by late life adjustment. This would be informed by the literature on late life adjustment. This study is not just a measure of activity of older adults, it is a focus of self-directed learning. Therefore the researcher must distinguish between meaningful activity, and personal learning projects motivated by late life adjustment. This is important for the researcher to consider because of the tendency of older adults to continue or resume previous meaningful activity (Atchley, 1993).

Income, marital status, education, children, or grandchildren will not be a criterion, but will be an important part of the demographic information. There is criticism that SDL has more samples from middle class background, yet when one reaches 75 their finances are perhaps a reflection of one's choice than privilege.

Sources of Information

Interviews.

In this qualitative research, the interview is the main source of data. Therefore, all aspects of the interview are carefully attended, from the walk through the front door to

the final transcription. Patton (1990) discusses the 'interview guide approach.' Topics and issues are specified in advance, yet the interviewer will decide the sequencing and wording during the interview. The outline allows for the collection of data to be somewhat systematic for each respondent, and if there are gaps, they can be anticipated and closed. The interview should remain fairly conversational and situational. The flexibility of this format, can allow for a change of sequencing and wording of questions. Yet this may result in substantially different responses reducing the comparability of responses.

In addition, the 'informal conversational interview' can add some important dimensions (Patton, 1990). This natural flow from the immediate surroundings allows for an informal interview that takes advantage of the context of the moment. This also allows for observation as well as flexibility so the interviewer can adapt the interview to the individual. The weakness is that the researcher may have different information from different people with different questions (Patton, 1990). A blend of an interview guide and informal conversational interview will be incorporated.

Seidman (1998) recommends three interviews to gain insight for in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing. Seidman incorporates this method from Schuman (as cited in Seidman). This approach is based on open-ended questions and intends to build and explore the participant's response to the questions. Hopefully the participants can reconstruct his/her experience within the purpose of the study. These three interviews are life history, details of the experience, and reflection on the meaning.

Based on previous pilot studies, this research will use the first interview 1). To become comfortable with one another, 2). To hear the life history of the participant, 3).

To become familiar with the tape recorder, and 4). To explain the research and receive appropriate signatures of approval. How and what questions, will be preferred over why questions. The main focus of the research will be introduced and the questions reflecting the study will be given to the participant. This is also a time to make sure the participant fits the criterion of the study. The second interview will concentrate on the specific purpose of the study. The interviewer will use a set of pre-determined questions.

The third interview is time for the interviewer to clear up any questions from and to clarify the purpose of the study. Although all three interviews are tape-recorded only the second will be transcribed for use in the study. Spreading this search for knowledge over three interviews may help prevent a misrepresentation of the sample and allow time to compensate for some of the problems incurred in traditional qualitative research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Kroth and Boverie (2000) included three separate interviews in their qualitative research on life mission and learning. The three interviews were approximately two hours each, and over a three-month period. The first interview was to establish a general foundation with the person, and to understand the context of their life. The second was focused on the participant's life mission, and the third was a member check. After each interview, tapes were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, and an interview guide was prepared for the next interview. Having more time with the sample not only produces rich and thick data, but also moves the data from mere conversation to a portraiture. This portraiture requires careful watching, listening, and interacting with the participant to piece together a more complete picture of the life of the sample (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Merriam (1998) suggests a 'semi-structure' approach as a possibility to the qualitative interview. This description is a mix of open ended and structured question. Questions should be carefully considered, they are the key to the door of data. The questions during this interview will be based on late life adjustment, and not solely focused on learning. For example, the following questions are suggested. What is it like to be an older adult? Can you describe this for me? What changes have you experienced, can you describe these for me? Can you tell me a personal story about being an older adult? What have you done about these changes?

In conclusion, three interviews based on a semi-structured and flexible guide will be incorporated.

Observation and Documents.

As mentioned earlier, SDL may be hard to discern or observe (Tough, 1971). The interviewer must be careful to attempt to understand the context of the setting for the interview, but more important is to observe the SDL of the participant. When it becomes clear that the participant is involved in a personal learning, the researcher must focus on this activity. It would be in the interest of the study to participate with them in this self-directed learning and ask them for permission to videotape this experience. During this experience the researcher will try to incorporate any documents that may be available. Perhaps this will be a book, or a craft, or some project that involves personal learning. This visual observation as well as seeing some document will add substantial credibility and triangulation to this work (Patton, 1990).

Summary

  The purpose of the study is to understand how older adults utilize SDL in late life adjustment. The sample will be 75 years old, reflect the rural demographic of the state of Georgia, and show evidence of SDL and LLA. The researcher will include interviews, documents, and observation. The interviews will be spread over three sessions and reflect a semi-structured format with open-ended and flexible questions. The second interview will be transcribed. The analysis will be based on recurring themes and the theoretical framework.

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