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Ten Steps for Conceptualizing and Conducting Qualitative Research Studies in a Pragmatically Curious Manner

Ronald J. Chenail
Nova Southeastern University, Davie, Florida, USA

In a world of methodological pluralism and mixed-methods, qualitative researchers can take a pathway of pragmatic curiosity by exploring their research interests and the possible design and methodology choices to create studies that not only allow them to pursue their investigative curiosities, but also result in coherent and effective systems of procedural choices. Ten steps are offered for researchers to conceive and conduct qualitative research projects that are both responsive to research goals and objectives and defendable to criteria of quality and critics of utility.
Key Words: Qualitative Research, Research Design, Research Methodology, Mixed-Methods, Methodological Pluralism, Pragmatic Curiosity.

The qualitative research being conducted today is in many ways not like your grandparents' qualitative inquiries! Although, for some researchers, there appears to be clearly defined boundaries between when researchers should use a qualitative research methodology and when they should employ a quantitative research methodology (e.g., Dobrovolny & Fuentes, 2008; Keenan & van Teijlingen, 2004). In this apparently black and white worldview, qualitative studies are most likely exploratory, naturalistic, subjective, inductive, ideographic, and descriptive/interpretive and quantitative studies are most likely confirmatory, controlled, objective, deductive, nomothetic, and predictive/explanatory. For other investigators, the boundaries are a bit more grey as contemporary designs become more mixed (e.g., Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Clegg Smith, 2011), pluralistic and diverse (e.g., Barker & Pistrang, 2004; Sandelowski, 2004) when it comes to utilizing particular methodologies to meet specific design goals and objectives.

These changes in methodology utilization patterns suggest we are entering an interesting time for qualitative research design in that more and more investigators are creatively using qualitative methods to address new types of research problems. For example, researchers are starting to use qualitative methodologies to conduct confirmatory studies such as the effectiveness of interventions (e.g., Flemming, Adamson, & Atkin, 2008) and efficacy of treatments (e.g., Verhoef, Casebeer, & Hilsden, 2002). In these cases, the qualitative researchers might employ a mix of procedures (e.g., randomized sampling more typically associated with experiments combined with open-ended interviews more typically associated with qualitative research) in the design. As these qualitative researchers offer, what Morse (2006) terms, "alternative forms of evidence" (p. 86), new opportunities for qualitative inquiries open up.

I offer these observations because as a beginning researcher once you learn traditional or typical utilizations of a qualitative methodology; you might subsequently find a number of articles in which the researchers used these approaches in an effectively novel ways. The key to all of this practical experimentation or pragmatic improvisation,

as well as with traditional uses of qualitative methodologies, is for you as the qualitative researcher to be clear as to what methodologies and procedures were used to accomplish what aspects of your design and to explain/defend why such choices were made. In such a defense, the keys are (a) to address the procedure conceptually first by citing a source for this new orientation to the process, (b) to explain the novelty in your application of the method to the accomplish the design objective at hand, (c) to show how the innovative procedural choice made coheres with the other design choices being implemented, and (d) to demonstrate how all the methodological choices made are allowing the study's design to address the guiding research question or hypothesis. In other words, you should embrace a sense of "pragmatic curiosity" to explore an optimal array of methodological choices to meet the needs of your design's concept which was chosen based upon your research questions. To paraphrase the title of Elliot Mishler's well-known 1979 essay, "Methodology in context: Is there any other kind?" So, taking this question as a mantra, it is critical for you to remember continually to craft a design so that it meets the need of your study in a coherent and effective manner.

To help you, as a beginning qualitative researcher, decide when and how to use qualitative research methodologies in this changing world, I have designed a ten step process for conceiving and conducting qualitative inquiries. For this guide, I suggest you take a pragmatic posture to creating studies that marry the most fitting design and methodology choices with the focus of your research curiosity. In this approach I suggest you remain true to your interests and then explore a variety of research approaches which can help in the designing and conducting studies to meet your needs. The bottom line is to be pragmatic in creating the design, but remain curious so every reasonable methodological option is considered. In doing so, I think it is important for you to be creative in considering and selecting design elements, and then to evaluate the design, methodology, and procedures you choose and implement, so these inquiry decisions remain fitting with your research goals and objectives and also coherent with each other.

By embracing this pragmatic curiosity, you will need to describe and explain each choice made in conceptualizing and conducting the research because each method is justified in the conduct of its usage in the study at hand. The answer to the question, "How does it make sense to utilize an ethnographic methodology in a study designed to explore the effectiveness of a psychotherapy intervention?" is "Here is what I did and why these choices make sense in the context of my study." Without certainty in terms of methodological destiny, researchers are left with the tools of openness and rhetoric when it comes to defending their research choices (Chenail, 2011).

These ten steps are intended as a general set of guidelines for you to plan and execute a qualitative research study in a transparent and coherent manner. As an investigators following specific research designs such as discovery-oriented inquiry (Mahrer, 1988; Mahrer & Boulet, 1999) and qualitative research methodologies such as phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) or narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2007), you would be guided by more particular prescriptions to describe and defend your choices (see the appendix for a list of these basic resources), but as suggested by these ten steps, there are some actions and re-actions common across most if not all qualitative research projects when it comes creating fitting studies.

Before reading the ten steps I want to share an important clarifying point. Because I suggest qualitative researchers need to make many decisions in creating and conducting

a study via these ten steps, you may get the impression that I am suggesting qualitative research studies' designs must be complex in nature. To clarify this point, I would more accurately say I think qualitative research designs are multifaceted, but at their hearts I think the simpler they are the better. I emphasize this point for a number of reasons.

In qualitative research studies I think the method should be as simple as possible because the complexity of research lies in the matter to be studied especially in naturalistic and exploratory inquiries. If the method is overly complicated, then its many parts and phases might overwhelm the subject being studied. When complexity meets complexity, the results are usually a muddle. Embracing simple yet effective procedures is an optimal goal to which for qualitative researchers should strive: Collect rich data and let it shine as the star of the study. Like using fresh ingredients in cooking, keep the preparation and presentation simple so your guests can appreciate the qualitative differences great products can deliver.

More methodologies being used in a study do not necessarily make the design a superior one. If you find yourself designing a phenomenological grounded theory case study, please ask yourself do you really need to employ three of Creswell's (2007) five approaches to qualitative research in one research project? Like taking too many medications can lead to adverse effects to your body, using too many methodologies might produce negative side effects which could be unhealthy for your study. To help remedy this potential risk, please remember this simple research commandment: Thou shall not select an additional methodology for a study, until thou is sure the first methodology selected cannot manage all of the design issues.

As a final note, even though I offer ten steps for conceptualizing and conducting qualitative research studies in a pragmatically curious manner, please remember three guiding principles: Keep it coherent, Keep it clear, and Keep it simple. If you adopt these three pieces of advice as your research mantra, you will find yourself creating and completing qualitative studies of quality.

Ten Steps

Step One: Reflect on What Interests You

Think about the program, project, population, participant, problem, phenomenon, policy, practice, process, or product about which you would like to learn. For instance, are you interested in discovering students' experiences learning in field settings, the integration of theory and practice, how students learn online, becoming a culturally competent instructor, or customer satisfaction? Starting with a topic about which you have a passion helps to sustain you throughout the research process. It also helps you to find a design that fits your passion rather than needing to find a passion that fits a design!

Step Two: Draft a Statement Identifying your Preliminary Area of Interest and Justifying Its Scholarly and/or Practical Importance

Compose a simple sentence or two in which you state your beginning area of curiosity and explain why the topic is significant, relevant, and worthy of study. By doing so you begin to address the "so what" question right away. For instance, if you select

"how students learn online" as your preliminary area of interest, you might cite the increase in the number of students learning online or the growth of online programs and acknowledge the challenges involved with learning and teaching online as reasons why the topic would be worthy of further study. You could also cite a gap in the education research literature on this topic as another reason for wanting to pursue this area of inquiry. In addition, you can reflect upon your personal perspectives in relation to your preliminary area of interest and record your hopes, aspirations, and biases as an educator. As you progress through the rest of these steps, refer back to this record from time to time in order to assess how your personal perspectives are shaping the research process (e.g., biasing data analysis or research design).

Step Three: Hone your Topic Focus

Now that you have begun to articulate your area of interest, begin to hone your focus by considering the choices you need to make in order to design your study. For example, if you have selected "how students learn online" as your topic, explore the options you can exercise by deliberating on the following questions:

Who: Who do you want to study and from whose perspective do you want to learn about how students learn online (e.g., undergraduate, master's, and/or doctoral students, faculty members, program completers, students with specific demographics/characteristics like culture, race, religion, or ethnicity)?

What: What aspect of how students learn online would be your focus (e.g., students' experiences, evaluation of learning outcomes, participating in discussions, student-faculty interaction, student performance on assignments or examinations, faculty members' stories, or pre and post-course development)?

When: When would you focus on this phenomenon (e.g., pre-matriculation, during the first year, throughout a course, or a combination of all of them)?

Where: Where would you observe/interact this phenomenon (e.g., observing online electronic classrooms, interviewing students over the phone or the internet, focus group interview with faculty members who have taught students in online environments, and/or surveys)?

Why: Why would you study this phenomenon (e.g., because you want to inform, perform, reform, transform, describe, interpret, explain, confirm, criticize, suggest, evaluate, or assess something)?

How: How will you generate data in order to study this phenomenon (e.g., administer a survey, conduct interviews, make observations, collect transcripts of online sessions, or gather student journals)?

You can see that each of these questions begin with words often associated with journalistic inquiries because the investigative postures of both journalists and qualitative

researchers are typified by open-ended inquisitiveness. This open-ended posture applies to both the discovery of your research focus and your methodological design. Also, these questions are just some of the ones you can ask about your study to help you discover the areas in which you need to make important procedure questions and to decide what research methods will best help you achieve these design objectives.

Step Four: Compose your Initial Research Question or Hypothesis

Based upon your answers to the Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How questions, compose your initial research question. For example, one research question could be, "What are the experiences of doctoral students learning qualitative research in a primarily online learning environment?" In composing this research question, envision what would be the implications arising from the results of this study for education researchers, faculty members, students, program administrators, and other interested stakeholders.

This question may change over time as you become more and more familiar with the phenomenon to be studied so it is critical that you continually refer to the question to see if you are staying on course or, if you need to adjust the question as you learn more about what you know and still don't know about the area of study. In qualitative research it is perfectly okay to make adjustments to your research question as the inquiry develops, but it is critical that you are aware when these adjustments are made and make the appropriate adjustments to your design. Trouble can arise "in the field" if you become interested in some new area of inquiry and lack the self-reflection to know when you are drifting. Again, it is okay to drift as long as you are aware of the changes made in the course of the inquiry and justify the corrections being made.

Step Five: Define your Goals and Objectives

Focus on the overall goals of your potential research study and the objectives that you must accomplish in order to achieve these goals. For example, if a goal is to learn more about the experiences of doctoral students learning qualitative research in a primarily online learning environment, relevant objectives could be (a) Conduct a literature search in order to learn what has been previously published on this topic, (b) Adjust the research question based upon the literature review, (c) Identify potential sites for collecting data, (d) Prepare Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, etc. Make sure each goal and objective can be justified and evaluated so you can track the progress you are making and identify where problems are arising or where adjustments are being made.

Step Six: Conduct a Review of the Literature

Some researchers start their qualitative research process with a review of the literature, some delay their reviews until after the study is completed, and some continually review the literature throughout the research process (Chenail, Cooper, & Desir, 2010). Some qualitative researchers explore the literature to learn what is not known about a phenomenon and then formulate questions which will guide a discovery-

oriented inquiry to uncover new evidence about the phenomenon in question. With any of these approaches it is important that you identify key terms (e.g., students, doctoral students, qualitative research, education, and online learning) to guide the electronic searchers of relevant databases (e.g., ProQuest, ERIC, and Google Scholar); in addition, you should also complement your electronic searches with systematic reviews of the references cited in the articles collected to locate additional sources.

Step Seven: Develop your Research Design

In qualitative research, your design is the system of choices you make that helps you to conceive and conduct your study in an orderly and effective manner. Develop a research design which will allow you to address your research question or hypothesis effectively and efficiently. For example, does your research question suggest a design that will permit you to take a stance of curiosity in your study, or one that is more critical in nature, or one that asks you to help foster change in the organization or situation in which you will conduct your research? With each of these areas of emphasis you would conceive your design to align with the essence of your research question and to put you in the best position to achieve your research goals. To accomplish this plan you will need to make choices in the following areas:

Design Concept: Conceptually, how do you design your study in order for you to address your research question or hypothesis and to meet your goals and objectives? For example, will the design help you **to discover** or **explore** basic patterns of a naturally occurring phenomenon, **to evaluate** or **assess** the performance of a project, **to construct** a theoretical model that helps **to explain** the relationships between different variables, **to describe** how participants understand their experiences regarding some aspect of their lives, or work with participants **to change** their organization or system? Will your study be a **primary research** study (e.g., I will collect new data to study), a **secondary research** study (e.g., I will study data previously collected as part of another study), or a **meta-study** (e.g., I will study previously published studies)? Your answer to these questions will help you select an appropriate design concept. You may have also noted that I used a bold font to emphasize certain words. All of these words denote a different type of research design: Exploratory (e.g., Stebbins, 2001), Evaluation (e.g., Patton, 2002), Explanatory (e.g., Charmaz, 2006), Descriptive (e.g., Giorgi, 2009), Change (e.g., Reason & Bradbury, 2008), Primary (e.g., Maxwell, 2005), Secondary (e.g., Heaton, 2004), and Meta (e.g., Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). You can find more helpful guides to qualitative research design in the appendix located at the end of this paper.

Participants: Depending on your choice of design, you will form different relationships with the sources of your data (i.e., people, places, audio and visual artifacts, etc.). Research participants can be engaged as sources of information for you, co-researchers to help you carry out the study, or change-agents with whom you consult. As you determine the participants' roles, you then need to decide who will participate in the study, how will I gain access and recruit them, and what precautions will I need to take in order to protect them from harm throughout the study? Answers to these questions will help you craft your inclusion criteria, sampling strategy, site location, and so forth.

Research Methodology: Different qualitative research methodologies have different strengths when it comes of meeting the needs of different design concepts. For example, ethnographic methodologies are well suited for primary research studies conceived to describe social phenomenon and grounded theory approaches are quite useful for generating explanatory models. So whether your design concept is exploratory, descriptive, evaluative, or change-oriented, start by exploring and considering basic or traditional utilization of a methodology (e.g., phenomenology to study the lived experience of a group of people, Finlay, 2011; ethnography to describe the symbols, signs, rituals, ceremonies, and practices of an organization, Murchison, 2010; or grounded theory to generate a theory or model of a social happening, Charmaz, 2006). Some traditional fits between these methodologies and your research questions, goals, and objectives might be optimal for your study, but if that is not the case, then after becoming more familiar with basic renderings and applications, you might then explore variations, hybrids, and improvisations which might have a better fit. By remaining pragmatically curious you will avoid the practice of letting methodology totally drive the research rather than allowing your question and goals to organize the inquiry too.

Research Procedures: With each methodology you will need to decide what your procedures will be for selecting and sampling (e.g., convenient, purposeful, theoretical, random); and generating, collecting, preparing, and analyzing the data (Maxwell, 2005). Through the execution of these procedures or methods you will actually carry out the design you have conceived. If you have selected a well-developed qualitative research methodology such as ethnography, an experienced author such as Fetterman (2009) will provide you with helpful procedural prescriptions from data collection through data analysis you can adopt or adapt for your own study. If you have decided to take an "eclectic" approach in your study, you may pick and choose or mix and match from different "designer" brands such as ethnography (e.g., Murchison, 2010), grounded theory (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2007), or phenomenology (e.g., Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009); or from general qualitative research guides (e.g., Merriam, 2009) to create your set of data generation and analysis procedures. For example, you might construct and conduct your interviews based upon Kvale and Brinkmann's (2008) approach and select a coding system from those choices collected by Saldaña (2009). Whether you go with a designer or eclectic approach make sure the various procedures sync well with the others so the data flow is coherent and smooth. Also, make sure if you are only incorporating some elements from a designer methodology such as open and axial coding from grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) to create codes and categories as part of the qualitative data analysis in your eclectic qualitative descriptive design, please do not refer to your study as being grounded theory design or methodology because unless your study is designed to generate a theory or model it is not grounded theory in the full, designer sense of the methodology. Calling an eclectic design by a designer methodology name is akin to a selling a "knock-off" in fashion: If the purse was not designed and constructed to Gucci specifications, then don't call the bag a Gucci!

Quality Control: It is one matter to conceptualize a qualitative research study, but it is another concern to create a system by which you maintain quality control to

ensure the study you conceived is the one you end up conducting. To focus yourself on this challenge there are many questions you can ask: How will I maintain rigor (e.g., reliability, validity, trustworthiness, generalizability) throughout the study? How will I identify and manage ethical concerns arising throughout the research? As you consider these questions, you can first consider how these areas are addressed indigenously in the methodological and philosophical traditional you are considering for your design. In other words, when in phenomenology land, do as the phenomenologists do! Depending on context, you might want to incorporate a more generic approach to quality control, for example Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness or embrace some other qualitative research traditions for ideas (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994; Lamont & White, 2008). As with the choices of research procedures discussed above, make sure the qualitative control measures you select cohere with the design concept, methodology, and data collection and analysis decisions also being made.

As you make methodological decisions in each of these areas take care to ensure that your choices align with each other (Chenail, 1997). For example, with the variety of grounded theory designs available, your epistemological stance should be in basic agreement with that of the grounded theorist you select (e.g., Charmaz' 2006 version of grounded theory as your methodology with constructivist epistemology). If such an alignment is not the case, then you will need to explain and justify your variations.

Step Eight: Conduct a Self-assessment in Order to Determine What Strengths You Have That Will Be Useful in your Study and What Skills You Will Need to Develop in Order to Complete your Study

Whether considering the qualitative researcher as the instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), or as competent practitioner (Polkinghorne, 2010), certain skills, knowledge, and attitudes are needed to carry out the study effectively. As you review your plan and identify what skills and knowledge base you will need to complete the study successfully. Develop a growth plan for helping you to master the competencies you will need throughout the study (e.g., open-ended interviewing, taking field notes, using qualitative data analysis packages, writing, etc.). You can combine this development process with your efforts to test and refine the procedures entailed in your design. For example, you can practice your interviewing skills and improve the instrumentation in your study by interviewing yourself and recording and analyzing the results (Chenail, 2009). You may also consider creating a team or involve consultants to assist with your areas in need of development. Remember to reflect upon your personal context and point-of-view which may bias you during the study and record your plan for managing this perspective throughout the qualitative research project.

Step Nine: Plan, Conduct, and Manage the Study

Successful qualitative research projects involve careful management of four different yet connected studies: (a) the study proposed, (b) the study conducted, (c) the study reported, and (d) the study of these studies. Develop an action plan detailing the

steps you need to take in order to begin and complete your studies. Depending on the study, the elements you will need to address include: people (including yourself), communication, data (including back-up systems), analysis, results, technology, time, money, ethical concerns (including securing institutional approvals), and other resources. Maintain a chronicle of your research activities (e.g., lab notebook, journal, diary, audit trail, and time and effort reports) and save supporting documentation. Throughout the life of your studies you will need to make sure they remain in a coherent relational pattern. For example, it is easy to drift into other areas of interest as you begin to conduct your study, but you need to reflect back upon your study as proposed to make sure that you stay focused on the goals and objectives. Of course qualitative research design can be iterative meaning you can make adjustments along the way. In the event of these corrective changes, make sure you are aware as you make these deviations and revise your study plan or study report accordingly.

Step Ten: Compose and Submit your Report

Depending on the vehicle you will use to report your study (e.g., dissertation, thesis, scholarly paper, poster, or conference presentation), identify the relevant policies and rules governing the form, substance, and submission of the report (e.g., school or departmental guidelines, journal article submission requirements, book prospectus elements, style manual of the American Psychological Association, 2010, etc.) and report and submit your findings in compliance with these parameters. Even though there can be a variety of outlets to make the results of your study public, a typical reporting format would be as follows:

- Introduction and Review of Literature
- Methodology
- Findings or Results
- Discussion of Implications and Limitations of the Results

It is important to think about the form in which you will present your study early and often so you do not wait until the end of your study to write up your report. For example, you might draft a working title and abstract for your paper in progress. Both of these elements might start out being vague and abstract, but as you make your methodological choices and determine your findings and implications you will be able to make the title and the abstract clearer and more concrete. As you compose these separate sections and make sure the ways in which you characterize your focus, method, and findings cohere across the title, abstract, and body of the report (Chenail, Duffy, St. George, & Wulff, 2009). Also, if you compose your title and abstract during the conceptualization or proposal phase, you should also consider revising your title from its proposal form (e.g., phenomenon, focus, and method) to one more fitting of a completed study (i.e., one that includes a reference to the findings). Lastly, be prepared to write and re-write your report a number of times until you have accurately represented the process and outcome of your qualitative research project.

Discussion

The challenge of conducting a qualitative research study successfully is to manage choices well throughout the inquiry. In starting your first study you will quickly realize that one decision made usually opens up multiple new decisions with which you will also have to address. For example, after you decide your study will be an exploratory one, then you will have to decide which qualitative research methodology will best fit your research question. Then if you select grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), you next will need to figure out is what style of grounded theory works for the project. Then once you have chosen the Glaser variation (Glaser, 1994), you then will need to work on how you will actually carry out your exploratory Glaserian grounded theory study and so forth.

Although I have presented these steps in particular order, it is important to remember that the conceptualization and conduct of qualitative research is a circular, recursive, and reflective process. The decision-making process in research can best be understood as an integrated system in which choices influence choices so although a particular procedural choice is made at one point in the research process; this choice may need to be re-considered as other issues arise or as new insights arise in the research undertaking. This iterative aspect of qualitative research means you should continuously check and re-check the decisions made for these ten steps and judge and re-judge their effectiveness and coherence. Given the nature of the enterprise it is critical you manage not only the study proposed and conducted, but also the study of their study. In this reflective process, you can record the decision-making process via a journal or diary and retain evidence of the changes to form an audit trail. Such a practice serves not only as a quality control system to help with the research management, but can also be the inspiration of creative improvisations as new choices are considered and possibly implemented.

In making these methodological decisions in qualitative research studies, the best compass for you remains the research question. You should consult it often and let it be the guide to keep your design and methodological choices transparent, coherent, and simple. In the world of methodological plurality no design choice is right in and of itself; instead, as a qualitative researcher you must consider each step made along the way and justify each decision in terms of its fit with the your interest, goals, and objectives and the other choices already made in the study and those which will be made in the future of investigation. By taking and re-taking these ten steps, you will remain pragmatically curious as you conceptualize and conduct qualitative research of quality and utility.

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Appendix

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Author Note

Ronald J. Chenail is the Editor-in-Chief of *The Qualitative Report* and *The Weekly Qualitative Report* at Nova Southeastern University (NSU), where he also serves as the Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness, Director of NSU's Graduate Certificate in Qualitative Research, and Professor of Family Therapy. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed to Dr. Ronald J. Chenail at Nova Southeastern University, 3301 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314-7796 USA; Telephone: 954.262.5389; Fax: 954.262.3970; E-mail: ron@nova.edu.

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