

The Beginnings of a Christian Perspective on Qualitative Research

A handout to accompany a seminar on qualitative research

Presented at the 1998 Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS) pre-conference session by Donald Ratcliff

Emerging Constructs and Humility

A real advantage of qualitative research is the ability to *discover* the most relevant constructs, and not be limited to preset constructs determined during the initial design stage. This involves a humility that implies that you can make mistakes; you take the perspective of learner, implied many times in the book of Proverbs as the needed view to gain knowledge.

For example, you may want to determine the most important areas of spiritual development. You can go through the literature and find many references to James Fowlers' theory. Is this theory the best way to start? It may get you started, but within the qualitative perspective you would keep open to other perspectives and other constructs. James Fowler's theory may fit some situations and some theological contexts, but it is not the last word on the subject. With the more open qualitative approach, there is less likelihood that the most important variables will be overlooked--due to an overreliance upon the beginning theory and constructs--because other perspectives may emerge as more relevant and important, in at least this situation, and possibly others. It *is* possible that a theory can obscure what is really most important.

To assume we have all the necessary and important variables from the orienting theory and during the research design phase--prior to research--is to assume our predecessors (or committee chairs, or even ourselves) know what is most important, prior to even looking at the data. What a shame to spend the time, effort, and money of a good research study, only to discover the most important aspects must be overlooked (or worse yet, be so oriented towards the initial theory and constructs that you don't even know you are overlooking what is most important). From a theological framework, we are limited, finite creatures. We are not omniscient. This comes through in the humility of the qualitative perspective; we need to stay open to the data, and even to God's direction as we are gathering data. Let the data, and God, tell us what is most important, so we do not impose irrelevant constructs on the situation.

Multiple Lenses

Humility needs to continue in research, even as constructs emerge. Periodically try changing lenses ("in a multitude of counselors there is wisdom"). For example, as I entered into the children's world at school, the neo-Marxists' views I studied at the university began to make a lot of sense. I saw what appeared to be oppression by teachers and administrators. But I had a reality check when I went home to my children. As parent, I was given the position of responsibility, and that came close to the "oppressor" role I saw at the school. The neo-Marxist lens didn't feel so comfortable! Had I been a teacher or principal at the school, I suspect the neo-Marxist view wouldn't have seemed so great in that context either. Qualitative research, at least in theory, suggests that multiple perspectives--neo-Marxist, and otherwise--helps fill out a more complete perspective; multiple views helps in the understanding of the whole.

Studied Naivety

The need to suspend preconceptions helps us look beyond ourselves, to exercise the creativity God gave us--this is central to the image of God (context of Genesis 1). To the extent possible, we need to bracket ourselves out. John the Baptist said, "I must decrease and he must increase." Studied naivety means to work hard at being ignorant; to acknowledge presumptions and expectations, and reflect upon their possible influence. Some qualitative researchers speak of the "Martian role"--attempting to take the view of the ultimate outsider, the alien from another world. This openness seems implied in biblical content that suggest we need to stay open before God. He *is* an outsider, as well as an insider (i.e. as the incarnate Christ).

Use of First and Third Person in Writing

Traditionally, psychologists--and researchers in general--use the third person in writing, rather than the "me," "I," "my" of the qualitative researcher. This carries with it the assumption of objectivity, distance, the illusion of somehow being outside it all. Yet we are all humans, and subjective in our views. Implying that we can be more than just human is possibly to see ourselves as divine; totally objective. The third person can imply greater authority (minus the lightning bolts and thunder of the divine).

The first person perspective implies "this is my take on things," not the final answer, not the last word, and perhaps not even the best view of the phenomenon. Humility and realization we don't know absolutely is conveyed to the reader. Some more extreme qualitative researchers would even suggest that the third person fits better with nineteenth century colonialism, the assumption that Western perspectives are always better and other views should be

suppressed. The first person may suggest that other voices and viewpoints are also possible, and also need to be heard. Our way is not always the very best way; our perspectives are not necessarily God's.

The Value of the Etic Perspective

Qualitative research values the emic perspective, the insider's view--both the researcher's personal views and those researched. But there is also value in the etic perspective, an attempt to be objective. Fish are apparently not aware of the water in which they swim. Someone who doesn't live in water can clearly see the water. Similarly, to be an outsider to the social context may make you more aware of the components of the context, much more than those being researched. Both emic and etic perspectives are valuable, but the etic perspective may be encouraged by the realization that there *is* an objective, comprehensive perspective available. It is God's perspective. We cannot fully know His perspective, of course, but perhaps we can approximate that objectivity by acknowledging our backgrounds and assumptions, looking at their possible influence upon the design, data, and analysis in the research, and--most importantly--having a vital, intimate relationship with God and an openness to His correction; even his correction of research constructs and theory.

Multiple Levels of Reality

I recall at the 1982 CAPS conference in Atlanta, Donald MacKay spoke of the multiple levels of understanding phenomena. As a scientist, he pointed out that the electrical level of understanding a neon sign could be complete--exhaustive--and yet overlook the basic fact that the sign denoted something--the lit words conveyed a message. This is why scientific understandings--biochemical, quantitative methods--need to be supplemented with the meanings attributed by people. Even at the meaning level, one needs to allow for multiple meanings. The words "Drink Milk" are probably a commercial when they appear on a neon sign or on a milk carton, but when they appear on a research protocol, they denote what the person--or animal--just did. Multiple meanings are implicit in scripture as well; one can take a non-theistic view of the world, live for the day and assume God is irrelevant or different from the biblical portrayal. Or alternatively, one can decide "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord;" we can affirm the biblical alternative. There are consequences for everyday life, and eternal consequences, for each. But they are ways of seeing and behaving. I think Christians also can affirm, as does MacKay, that multiple levels exist in an objective view of the world. We can look at a situation theologically, psychologically, biologically, and so on. Each of these--and other views--is articulated at some point in the Bible. The goal in looking at multiple perspectives

is to gain a more holistic view, in keeping with qualitative perspectives and biblical--especially Old Testament--holism.

The Role of the Reader/External Validity

In most standard research, the reader's role is passive; the recipient of knowledge gained by the researcher. In qualitative research, there is a more active role for the reader. For example, external validity is a cooperative effort between the researcher and the reader. The researcher's responsibility is to give as much contextual detail and information about participants as reasonably possible, so that the reader of the report can assess whether the place and people of application are sufficiently similar to those of the study to justify application. External validity is perhaps more limited, in that similar contexts are more likely to apply, at least until a number of studies have been completed in sufficiently different contexts with different people, to merit broad application and thus have a degree of *general* external validity.

Much the same principle is followed in biblical hermeneutics. Do the accounts, the guidelines, the principles fit a contemporary situation? Several examples in divergent situations with different people observed in the Bible implies more general applications.

There is also a strong reader role in her/his examining of the logic matrix analysis--where data is summarized in a matrix of some kind. One can analyze a qualitative matrix in many possible ways. The researcher may use one or two, but providing the reader with the matrix--as I did in my dissertation--allows other kinds of analysis by those reading the report. There is, in a sense, "reader triangulation" possible--several readers could look at the same matrix, come up with their own interpretations, then compare how they interpreted the matrix with the interpretations of others. This is also the case for video research data--the reader (person viewing the video data) can interpret in many possible ways what is on the videotape. Triangulation is also possible here. Humility, again, is implied--the researcher does not have the final interpretation; he or she is not God, and other views are possible.

Church and Christian Counseling Applications

Qualitative research is only beginning to be applied to church contexts. Some work in this area is occurring at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Talbot Theological Seminary (graduate school of Biola University). It is perhaps amazing that we don't have more first-person accounts of people who are studying church activities in detail. [One interesting example is a study of a

Pentecostal congregation titled *Led by the Spirit* by Stephen Parker, taken from his dissertation at Emory University.] We need emic perspectives; how do people within church and parachurch settings understand what is occurring? This might point the way towards theological triangulation--theology based not only on the Bible, but also on people's experience of God. Experience can inform our theology--people don't always interpret scripture accurately; and theology can inform our experience; give us possible categories.

Christian counseling also needs to be examined qualitatively. What we think happens in counseling may be different than we think. We may think the Rational Emotive Therapy is changing people, but it may in fact be the relational component, or the terminology used for the problem, or even the expectation of change, that makes the difference. We need to study our clients systematically; we need to hear their understandings of what occurred in the therapy context as one *possible* source of understanding what occurred.

Isn't Qualitative Research Inherently Humanistic?

Qualitative researchers usually emphasize gaining the perspectives of those being studied as a priority. If those studied take a humanistic view, then qualitative researchers should reflect that perspective. If those studied are evangelical Christians, the researcher should try to capture that perspective and represent it fairly. Of course the researcher will also present her/his own view, and in the process suggest how that may have influenced the attempt at representing the participants' views. The goal is to faithfully present at least the views of participants and the observer/researcher, and ideally add other views from the literature as well. If secular constructs can completely represent what is occurring, then either the Christians aren't distinctive in their Christian activity, or the researcher has infused secular constructs where they are not sufficient for representing what occurred.

I brought my two boys to my graduate course in qualitative research at the university. I had students interview them in two groups, with the assignment of representing their perspectives accurately. I didn't foresee this ahead of time, but my boys talked about their understandings of the Bible. Students represented my kids' "strong emphasis of values" and so on, but to have overlooked that component of what the boys said would have fallen short of accurately representing what they said.

Isomorphic

I like this word. It means point by point correspondence between two different things. For example, data should be isomorphic to theoretical conclusions. They fit well in most, if not all, respects. There is also the need to be isomorphic between the way research is conducted and the way it is represented in the research report. As Christians, we need to tell the truth, and work towards a fuller understanding of truth. That's the goal of good research as well. Of course, just because something is isomorphic doesn't automatically mean it is a complete description. There are multiple levels of understanding. A economic theoretical framework may explain a transaction to a degree, but there can be spiritual and emotional levels of understanding as well. Each level of explanation needs to be isomorphic to be trusted as accurate. But there can be isomorphism without accuracy--there can be point-by-point correspondence between the flat earth theory and one's personal experience of seeing what appears to be a plane that goes on forever. We need to be humble even about isomorphic results. Isomorphic concepts and conclusions are necessary but not sufficient for representing truth.

Can You Be Too Subjective?

One of my graduate students at The University of Georgia wondered aloud if all she was seeing during data collection was in one way or another a reflection of her own study and thinking *prior to* data collection. It is a good question; the fact she asked the question suggests more of a reflective posture than many researchers (qualitative or quantitative) have given to the process of research. That kind of reflection can help in establishing validity--what are your assumptions, and how might they have been reflected in conclusions, data collection, and so on.

I told her that we need to push ourselves to see data that is more than just our assumptions; we need to explore new possibilities as we collect and analyze. If we record our reflections and explorations, we can push ourselves into the unknown and the unforeseen. The surprises we have in data collection and analysis suggests the possibility of validity--genuine surprises are probably going against expectations and biases. The surprises suggest an openness, a relative suspension of preconceptions, that will reflect the real world. Not everything will be a surprise--sometimes the world will fit our assumptions, but the presence of surprises suggests we are open to something other than our presumptions.

God surprises us in everyday life. God surprised people in the Bible--I still find myself scratching my head at the Sermon on the Mount. God turns people on their heads; it's an upside down world. It's an indication of an outside perspective; there is more than sheer subjectivity.

But suppose, for a moment, the worst-case scenario. Perhaps what you see *does* only reflect what you expected before the research. That does not mean you have wasted time. Virtually all quantitative research starts with prior categories, theories, and hypotheses. So the worst case situation is that qualitative research will do what quantitative research may have done all along--be imprisoned within its own conceptual parameters. And, let's face it, quantitative research has given us a great deal, even with this danger.

We may find that, yes, the categories and constructs and hypotheses *do* fit the data at hand. This verification, the substantiation of prior findings to this unique situation, will potentially extend the external validity of the research--we have found another group of people and another social site where the categories and hypotheses fit. That is a small advance, but an advance nonetheless. Will that be enough for a committee? Perhaps, but don't rule out the possibility of multiple analyses by multiple analysts; multiple data collection by multiple collectors, and so on. Others may see what you overlooked. Triangulation has occurred, which can relate to internal validity as well as external validity. In the process, you can describe how your qualitative methods and analysis got you to the same place that other methods and analyses took other researchers.

Dispassionate Views

Self-doubt is basic to all good research. You state the null hypothesis in quantitative research--a statement that you will not find statistical significance. Stating expectations in qualitative research serves somewhat of the same purpose. Testing the hypothesis is basic to all research--qualitative research often tests hypotheses, but that happens *after* the hypotheses emerge from the data. The assumption is that "I may be wrong." This is rarely seen in postmodern thought/research--the emphasis on the multiple views of reality may obscure the possibility that some people are just plain wrong. This same problem can occur with radical feminist and neo-Marxist research. Actually I have a hard time seeing either of those as real research; the assumption made in each system appears to be that the constructs will fit every situation, instead of a more tentative and exploratory testing of assumptions and hypotheses. They are interpretations, and thus potentially insightful and valuable, but let's not muddy the water by calling them research.

You should be your own worst critic. You must satisfy yourself that the results are correct, and you should be the most difficult person to please in this respect. Constantly check your interpretations for other possible explanations, and other ways to test the data. Christianity describes--and gives a reason for--self-deception. The assumption is made that people in general deceive themselves into believing either God doesn't exist, or he isn't all that important in real life.

This self-deception--like all deception--can ultimately be traced back to the influence of the "father of lies," the Great Deceiver.

Bracketing Self Out

This phrase, used by some qualitative researchers, is obviously idealistic. We cannot completely bracket the self out of data collection and analysis. But it is a worthy goal. Again, as John said, "I must decrease." But why go to all the efforts to be "objective" by attempting to suspend our assumptions? Why not just say this is my bias, and I will look at the data with this bias, period? Why not be "honest" like the neo-Marxists and radical feminists? It is an option to do that; this is the essence of the so-called "postmodernist research." Perhaps if we are racists who want to talk to other racists, that is enough. Perhaps if we are radical feminists that want to talk to other radical feminists, that is enough. Perhaps if we are Christians who only want to talk to other Christians, that is enough. But let's not call it research; it probably won't convince anyone other than those already convinced. This is the essence of tribalism--I will only talk with my group, my tribe, and no other. But if we want to enter into the public arena, if we want to exchange ideas, if we want to convince and convert, if we want to learn from and teach others, if we desire meaningful interaction with others outside the tribe, across cultures and across personal realities, we need a common ground, a common language, a common method, a way of going beyond the limitations of our biases. We must create a relatively level ground of exchange, not pretending to be free of bias, but a ground where we state our biases and attempt to suspend those biases to the degree we can, even if it cannot be accomplished perfectly. The goal is not to agree, but to understand ourselves and others to the degree we can. We cannot be completely objective--only God is completely objective (because he is beyond us, transcendent, as well as one with us via Christ). The pretense of complete objectivity is an old, old temptation, that has been with us from the beginning of human existence: "You shall be as gods."

But there is something noble and virtuous about attempting to suspend our biases, however limited we are in that ability, holding our biases at a distance, and testing biases against the empirical world. That virtue is the ability to admit I can be wrong, and I want to find out if I am wrong, and will admit it if I am wrong. It is a genuine quest for truth.

The Continuity of Creation and Continuity of God's Image

[I'm borrowing a bit from Francis Schaeffer's ideas for part of this.]

There are two continuities in the world. There is the continuity of creation and the continuity of God's image.

The continuity of creation includes:

- Natural inorganic matter--this category of creation is at the extreme left of a chart; it has the natural limitations of space and time. Inorganic matter shares with all other created things a continuity of creation; it functions according to God's laws of physics. We may study physics and chemistry and learn something of ourselves, because we have a continuity of creation with inorganic matter. Example: chemical reactions in the body; pull of gravity; we share these characteristics with inorganic matter.
- Machines--they are closer to humans; they also have the same physical limitations humans have, thus we can study machines and may learn something about ourselves. This category is slightly to the right of inorganic matter. Machinery is technically a subset of inorganic matter, yet there is the distinction that they are made by humans thus they will or can reflect something of their "creators"--human beings--at least at the metaphoric level. Schaeffer said they "reflect the mannishness of man" (or, perhaps better stated "reflect the person-ness of people). Example--the computer as model for brain functioning. Humans use their minds to make machines, thus machines reflect the human mind to some extent.
- Plants--one step closer to humans, and thus slightly to the right of machines. They are also part of creation, and they have the additional similarity of organic continuity with people. They live and die, have cells, and have other similarities to humans. Thus we can learn something of ourselves by studying them. For example, Jesus used the planting of seeds and growth of plants as metaphors for spiritual development.
- Animals--they share the above commonalities with humans, thus they are to the right of plants and next to humans on the chart because they share even more with humans than the above categories. They are physical, organic, and have the additional characteristic of learning which is in common with humans. Because of this continuity of learning with humans, we can learn a great deal about humans through animal experiments. Because of the organic continuity which is even stronger than plants, we can learn about the effects of medications as well as the process of learning itself through use of animals.
- Humans--in the middle of the chart, sharing with all of the above the continuity of creation. However, with the other two categories below, we also share the continuity of the transcendent; the commonality of a dimension of existence termed "spiritual." There is the continuity with God in that we are made in God's image

(Genesis 1). We can research people by studying people, but--at least theoretically--the best researchers are those that understanding the limitations of people and that complete objectivity is elusive, but we can approximate this to the degree we try to see things as God sees them. Yet to try to be God will result in self-deception; we try to move in that direction, without pretending to arrive at the ideal.

- Angels--this category is to the right of humans because we are made "a little lower than the angels." I'm not sure about the continuity of creation--I believe angels are probably created, but not necessarily as part of the creation account in the Bible (they aren't mentioned in that context). We don't know much about angels. For example, we can't be certain about how the Nephilim in Genesis 4 relate to angels. The fall of Satan and the fall of the dark angels (demons) is not very clear in the Bible--we have a clearer theology of this than we do biblical evidence; perhaps the theology is accurate, but it's dangerous to be too dogmatic about angels. Certainly angels inhabit a realm that humans don't have access to; or at least most humans most of the time don't access. But angels do enter the time-space continuum people usually inhabit. There is a spiritual continuity in that angels are good or bad, and apparently have an eternal existence as do humans. We can't really research angels, but we can carefully study them by analyzing accounts in scripture, and perhaps learn more by careful research of those who have supposedly encountered angels (I'm a bit tentative here because people are quite creative in their ideas about angels, and sometimes people have encountered angels that are thought to be good but are actually angels of the Great Deceiver.)
- God--this is the category at the extreme right of the chart. While God is unique, he is also three persons. There is somehow a maleness to him--"father" implies gender, "son" implies gender, and the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary, which also implies the male gender. While there is a fundamental maleness to God, Jesus and Paul emphasize the spiritual insignificance of human gender; "there is no male or female," and some of the best examples of spirituality in the Bible are people who had both masculine and feminine traits (e.g., "Jesus wept"). There is a continuity between God and humans because of the image of God, and a continuity via the incarnation of Christ, the son of humanity (Mary was his mother) and the son of God (the Holy Spirit's coming upon Mary). Thus to study God--theology--can result in understanding people, to the degree they reflect the image of God (which is badly scarred--we are fallen creatures). Of course the theology of God also involves an understanding of humans in or out of relationship to God. We can also study God by studying Jesus, who is God incarnate.

These are a few fairly disconnected thoughts about qualitative research from a Christian perspective that might be considered and developed further in the future. None, I'm sure, is in its final form. I'd appreciate your reactions. My email address is don@ratcliff.net. An earlier version of this paper was distributed at the March, 1998 annual conference of the Christian Association for Psychological Studies (CAPS), Chattanooga, Tenn.