Thoughts for students considering becoming qualitative researchers

Qualities of qualitative researchers

Lilian H. Hill
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI, HATTIESBURG, MISSISSIPPI

ABSTRACT

This article is intended for use as a class handout to aid students who are learning about qualitative research to determine whether qualitative research is a good fit and whether they have the personal characteristics required to become effective qualitative researchers.

Keywords: teaching research, qualitative research, becoming a researcher

INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS engaged in introductory qualitative research courses may wonder if this type of research is really for them. They may question if they have the requisite skills and characteristics, or alternatively, they may enter a class with their minds filled with questions about the rigour of qualitative research. According to Janesick (2004), a person learning to become a qualitative researcher has to ‘train the mind, the eye, and the soul together’ (p. 2). A qualitative researcher has to learn to see, hear, perceive and understand in new ways. Students need to learn to move themselves out of the centre of their own attention, and clearly observe social settings and the individuals within them. They have to learn to see meanings from the perspectives of others, and not impose their own preconceived notions on experience. They need to develop a finely tuned ethical sense and negotiate ethical dilemmas encountered in the research process. Finally, they should become able to analyse and perceive patterns in the data they collect so that they are able to conduct thematic analysis. None of this is easy and learning to do so is a developmental process involving both the theory and philosophies of qualitative research and skill development. Hurworth (2004) challenges us with the question of whether the teaching of qualitative research should emphasise practice or theory, or try to integrate the two. My belief is that both are important, but I also think students need to start with self-examination to develop their abilities as researchers. The class handout that follows is an attempt to explain to students what qualities they will need to have or cultivate in order to become effective qualitative researchers. To set the tone, I begin with a small quotation from The Tao of Pooh (Hoff, 1982, pp. 69–70).
In order to become an effective qualitative researcher, people need to develop many essential qualities. Some of these qualities are listed below. Do not worry if you do not feel yourself to have these characteristics yet—becoming a researcher is a developmental process that may involve some unlearning. Do not let the list intimidate you; instead realise that these are issues that all qualitative researchers must revisit from time to time. This is an invitation to an exciting journey in which you may find yourself growing spiritually, emotionally and mentally in the process of becoming a qualitative researcher who is a disciplined inquirer (Janesick, 2004).

1 Curiosity about the world

People who are keen observers of social settings and other people tend to make good qualitative researchers. Do you want to know how things are done in unfamiliar settings or occupations? Are you a people-watcher? Do you notice what other people wear? How they speak and behave? Can you guess how they might be feeling? Do you pay attention to who speaks first, who replies to whom, and how people respond in a conversation? Do you naturally ask questions that begin with how, what, why? People who do this are often able to perceive things in situations that others may not. ‘Research is an active verb. It is a way of seeing the world that goes beyond the ordinary’ (Janesick, 2004, p. 3). Qualitative research is based in a holistic world view, where people’s perceptions have meaning within given contexts.

2 Intuition

While the common understanding of intuition often relates it to sudden flashes of insight, the intuitions of qualitative researchers are based in deep experience. Qualitative research involves embarking on a pilgrimage of learning about the topic of interest and becoming absorbed by it. Qualitative researchers try to remain open to the unexpected, be absolutely honest in action and reflection, and develop a sense of multiple realities.
They strive to suspend and minimise deliberate, conscious rational processes that can be very chatty and interfere with clear sight and hearing. A researcher who is aware of personal feelings and can allow him/herself to be led in the intuitive process is better able to dialogue with the materials, the experience, the setting, the people, the cultural context and the social context so that he or she is ready to learn what they can reveal. Commenting on the balancing act involved in being aware of one’s own perspectives in order to shift focus to enter someone else’s experiences, Eyring indicates that as ‘phenomena are viewed from … many different angles, a richer picture can be seen’ (1998, p. 141).

3 Able to observe without judging

Can you observe a social setting and other people’s behavior without making immediate judgements about what it might mean? As the quotation from the *Tao of Pooh* above suggests, things (social interactions, people’s behavior) should be allowed to unfold naturally rather than the researcher attempting to interfere. Can you suspend your internal chatter (bills to pay, assignments to complete, etc.) long enough to simply observe, to see what is happening in a setting or social situation? If this sounds slightly meditative, it is. A clear mind is able to see more; it is related to intuition and patience. Deep listening is an act of contemplation. ‘The discipline of presence requires [you] to be there, with senses focused on the group at hand, listening rather than thinking about what [you’re] going to say’ (O’Reilly, 1998, p. 9). If we are truly present, we are able to see clearly and avoid making judgements prematurely. Being non-judgemental is also essential to establishing trust with research participants.

4 Able to let others lead the conversation

Can you talk to other people and let them lead the conversation? Watch an interview done on a morning news show and see how many interviewers appear to actually supply the interviewee’s answers. ‘That must have been awful!’ they’ll say, which leaves the person with little response but to say yes. In a qualitative interview, the researcher’s interviewing skills bring a calming effect, which allows the participant to be at ease and speak freely. A researcher asks questions that get others talking, follows their lead and lets them introduce new topics. The researcher may have come prepared with an interview guide, but will let the other person lead the conversation. Sometimes people need to take a breather if they are talking about a difficult experience; allowing them to talk about something else for a little while serves this purpose. A good interview is one characterised by the fact the interviewer’s voice is heard very little.

5 Able to view experiences from others’ perspectives

The goal in qualitative research is to understand the meaning that people make from their experiences. A researcher who is trying to impose his/her personal frame of reference on what a person shares with him/her jeopardises the trustworthiness of the study. Qualitative researchers attempt to suspend their own personal understandings, beliefs and interpretations so that they are able to better understand the research
participant’s experience from his/her perspective. Some people believe that this is not entirely possible; however, it is a goal of qualitative research to describe the essence of experience from the perspective of the person experiencing it. If we believe like Husserl (1965), that consciousness is central to human experience, and that experience as it appears in consciousness is the proper domain of human sciences, then we must attend to how people construct their experiences, or reality.

6 Patience

Qualitative research is process-oriented and takes time. Trying to hurry will short-change the process and diminish the results. It is bad practice to begin a qualitative research project by trying to predict the study’s timeline or findings. Researchers cannot do justice to a long-term study if they try to minimise the time spent in data collection and analysis. Researchers need to have patience and persistence with the process, enjoy it, and follow it all the way through. As a novice researcher, you will make missteps or realise that you want to approach an issue differently as your study evolves. This happens to experienced researchers, too. Mistakes that may occur with the interpretation of social reality are minimised by diligent researchers by following strict procedures.

7 Good memory

A good memory is needed to write good research notes, to remember not only what someone did but how they did it, not only what someone said but how they said it, the tone of voice they used, whether they hesitated or spoke smoothly, whether they used a lot of filler words or spoke directly, whether they made eye contact or looked at the floor or ceiling. However, it also essential to take advantage of memory tools—use tape recorders, photographs, even video recorders (with the participant’s permission) and above all, take good notes.

8 Organisation

Qualitative research generates a lot of data, data that is not intended to be reduced to numbers in a spreadsheet program. Qualitative data can include observation notes, interview transcripts, research notes, and possibly documents and photographs. Keeping this material well organised facilitates locating important information while conducting data analysis. Researchers sometimes need to jog their memories about the individual settings observed, the individual people interviewed, and to not mix them up. Keeping good research notes and storing data in an organised way is essential to keeping promises regarding anonymity and confidentiality of data and to generating good research findings.

9 Tolerance for ambiguity

Qualitative research requires changing habitual ways of thinking and exploring viewpoints informed by differing world views. Understanding that a respondent’s beliefs and interpretation of his/her experiences are informed by different understandings of
the world allows researchers to capture the fullness of their experiences. Researchers need to cultivate the ability to cope with difference and multiple-meaning systems. Understanding an issue from within a larger set of relationships imparts a significance to what otherwise might seem to be contradictory, random ideas or events. This takes time and the forbearance not to seek closure too quickly. It involves trying to think how others think, feel how others feel, and experience the way they do. It is an extension of empathy.

10 Ability to perceive patterns

A crucial part of qualitative research is the ability to perceive patterns in rich and complex data. The approach to data analysis used should be consistent with the study’s research questions, theoretical framework, methodology, and with the methods of qualitative research (Dey, 1993). The critical element in a qualitative study is the meaning that people make of their experiences. Some qualitative research is descriptive in nature, but often the purpose is to interpret, to explain and understand experience and the meanings that people attend to it. Different research traditions of qualitative research emphasise different foci in their analysis procedures; however, the researcher is always the primary data analysis instrument. Learning to become a qualitative researcher involves cultivating and trusting one’s own research imagination. Researchers immerse themselves in the data, learn to separate the meaningful from the trivial, explore patterns in the data, and then articulate the patterns they perceive. This requires both honesty and remaining true to the data.

11 Ability to write expressively

Qualitative data and analysis are expressed in words. To give life to people’s experiences researchers need to be able to write vividly. This does not mean that learning to become a qualitative researcher entails also becoming a novelist, but write-ups of qualitative findings need to be able to tell people’s stories. Mark Turner tells us that the ‘everyday mind is essentially literary’ and that the ‘narrative or story is basic to human thinking’ (Turner, 1996, p. 7). Qualitative study findings are written in rich, thickly descriptive text that brings people and their lives to life so that readers can intuit and understand. Practice helps.

12 Courage

Qualitative researchers cannot hide behind instruments and data when conducting qualitative research. They need to spend time with people who have experiences relevant to the research topic. Researchers need to ask people questions, sometimes about topics that are deeply personal. They need courage to suspend their own beliefs and to really immerse themselves in the experiences of others. Oran (1998) writes that this feels like stepping out of one’s self and taking on a new role, and that it can be scary. The reward is the ability to enter and explore a new world. Researchers need to be courageous to take tentative data analysis and show the analysis to others to obtain peer review, and then take that same or revised analysis and show it to the research participants for a member
check. They need courage to persist and to trust their own conclusions. Finally, courage is needed to submit a study for publication and to accept the comments of editors and reviewers. Research is not for the faint of heart.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilian H. Hill is Assistant Professor of Adult Education at the University of Southern Mississippi. She teaches a variety of adult education courses as well as qualitative research. Her research interests include the beliefs that guide professional practice; community education; environmental adult education; and health literacy and education.

Dr Lilian H. Hill
Assistant Professor of Adult Education
Education Leadership and Research
College of Education and Psychology
The University of Southern Mississippi
#5027, 118 College Drive
Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39406
USA
Phone: +1 601 266 4622
Fax: +1 601 266 5141
Email: lilian.hill@usm.edu