Chapter 8

QUALITATIVE INQUIRY AND THE PRACTITIONER: ANSWERING INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS THAT EMERGE DAILY IN ACADEMIC ADVISING

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In this chapter, I focus on a definition for qualitative research as well as the designs and tools key to a qualitative project. Qualitative research is a robust form of inquiry that offers understanding through rich description. Designs are significant for establishing a systematic plan of inquiry for answering the research question. After establishing the design, the researcher selects the methods for gathering data compatible with the design. Throughout this chapter, I use my own experiences to address the role of the academic advisor as practitioner-researcher. I introduce various research designs with examples that explain the strategy as well as contribute to practice in higher education.

Introduction

"Qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people." (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 2)

I selected this quote as a starting point on qualitative inquiry for a reason. I originally conceived of this chapter as a mechanical guide informed by a list of who's who in interpretive research. This technical approach was scholarly, focused, and precise. However, I was missing the point of qualitative research when I ignored my own experience as a practitioner-researcher. Thus, I developed this chapter to examine qualitative research (also referred to as "qualitative inquiry" or "interpretive research") through the lenses of qualitative research scholars as well as my own perspective, which is informed by my lived experiences in academic advising and interpretive inquiry. Also, I draw upon research studies from advising and higher education colleagues who have traveled the road of the practitioner-researcher.

I constructed the chapter to begin with a definition of qualitative inquiry and then I transition to a discussion of qualitative designs and methods that address the questions that emerge through academic advising practice. Throughout this chapter, I share my experiences for three reasons. First, the vignettes serve as examples for interpreting and explaining research concepts. Second, I am locating myself within this chapter as an active participant. I am sharing my experiences as an academic advisor and administrator as well as a producer and consumer of research to evidence that the lived experience is acknowledged in this genre (Coffey, 1999; Ellis & Bocher, 2003; Jackson, 2004). Third, I aspire to empower advising professionals to answer questions that emerge in their advising practice through systematic research. I strive to offer guidance and inspiration for academic advisors to pursue interpretative inquiry.

Qualitative Research: What Is It?

Another meeting was occurring to process meaning from numbers. This time we reviewed the statistics for admissions to various professional schools. The numbers had been crunched to tell us that overall our students were successful in gaining admission to medical, dental, law, as well as other schools. Then, the numbers were discussed based on student characteristics such as gender and major. The result of these data identified an attrition issue with respect to gender for certain professional programs. But these numbers did not explain the experiences of students as they prepared for admissions to medical, dental, or law school. Questions came forward from those present in the room:

• Why are women not applying to medical

or dental school?
* How would students describe their experiences in preparing for admissions?
* How do students describe their relationship with an academic advisor and faculty as they consider and pursue admission to professional school?

The questions continued beyond this meeting, as did the students leaving the process of preparing to apply to professional school. The numbers identify a phenomenon but are remiss in providing the detail for understanding why women are deciding to continue or exit the admissions process to medical and dental schools. (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2008)

This vignette sets the stage to define qualitative inquiry. Through definition, the power of this naturalistic genre unfolds for capturing the experiences of people through dialog and observation. By describing and understanding the varied and real experiences of students, higher education professionals will comprehend issues from the location of the lived experience. The experience involves students pursuing academic goals as well as faculty and staff who are on the front line in the educational process.

Marshall and Rossman (1999, p. 2) initiated the task of defining qualitative research by stating that it is "pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people." Qualitative researchers are focused on answering a question based on the words and actions of people who become participants or respondents for a study. The researcher engages individuals in conversation, observes their practices and behaviors, or gathers relevant objects to gain deeper understanding of a phenomenon or process from a human perspective. Once data in the form of transcripts, field notes, or artifacts are collected, he or she must uncover the meaning of these data for answering the question and contributing to the body of knowledge in the area of interest.

Creswell (1998, p. 15) further complicates the definition. He suggested:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

This definition offers two key points. First, qualitative research is filled with methodological traditions or designs for organizing the research question. Second, the researcher attempts to understand the phenomenon or process holistically. She or he begins with a review of literature and follows with the selection of a research design and methods for data collection. Upon collecting data, the researcher not only draws meaning from these data but also considers avenues for establishing trustworthiness and authenticity within the findings. The product of a qualitative study advances understanding through interpretation that is communicated in well-developed descriptions of the phenomenon, process, or theory.

The researcher is a key element of interpretive inquiry. A common term explored within qualitative research methods is *researcher as instrument* (Coffey, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Ellis & Bocher, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 2005). Many scholars encourage the researcher to consider his or her research philosophy or paradigm, which has been shaped by an epistemology, ontology, and axiology. This paradigm or philosophy situates knowledge and the creation of knowledge and results in the location in which the researcher places her or himself and the participants within the research process. Some researchers identify with the postpositivism approach and so they bracket oneself, as an objective being, outside the research (Holstein & Gubrium, 2005). In this paradigm, the researcher creates knowledge through an unbiased interpretation of data and locates the answer or truth through interaction with society (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Due to their belief in multiple realities or truth, other researchers with a subjective stance identify with a continuum of paradigms. They may gravitate to social constructivism, hermeneutics, and critical theory, among others, after reflecting on how they come to know and understand. Through social constructivism, a researcher delves into the development of meaning through interactions within society and often creates a co-constructed meaning. Hermeneutics is used to interpret the meaning of an object based on language and context in society. Those employing critical theory focus a marginalized lens (race, gender, sex orientation, etc.) to make meaning of the world based on power issues. Other research philosophies offer epistemological homes from which the researcher can frame a study (see Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2001).

Through the nonpositivistic models, the researcher considers his or her own level of involve-

ment within the process of inquiry and acknowledges multiple truths based on contextual and temporal situations for him or herself and the participants. The investigator comes to the study with an identity, information, and biases that will serve as the foreground to oneself and the participants. Self-disclosure through autobiography before initiating the study and reflexivity through journaling during the process are recommended practices for assuring integrity of the findings. These techniques establish location within the study, allow participants and reviewers to challenge interpretation of data, and maintain the integrity of the researcher (Charmaz, 2003, 2006; Coffey, 1999; Delgado-Gaitan, 1993; Ellis & Bocher, 2003; Jackson, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Punch, 1994).

Identifying the location of the researcher is significant within the practitioner-researcher paradigm. Academic advisors and advising administrators interact with students daily. In these practitioner roles, they view students through various lenses that cannot be ignored as the advising professional moves practice to inquiry. Also, the practitioner must consider more than career identity as she or he looks for assumptions and biases. By establishing a holistic identity through autobiography as the questions are emerging, the practitioner-researcher impacts the quality of the study and findings as well as communicates the ways in which the research process has impacted him or herself personally.

As I engaged in a study to understand the process of women deciding to apply to medical school, I wrote a biographical statement that included elements of my journey through higher education as well as my experience as an advisor. This process of self-disclosure alerted participants, reviewers, and me to my assumptions about the impact of academic advising within student engagement and achievement processes. It established trustworthiness of the findings as well as guided my analysis of data in my study on women applying to medical school (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2008).

Qualitative Designs

I pondered the dilemma that administrators for healthcare professional programs face on a local and national level. As I reviewed data, more and more questions emerged about this phenomenon. After I started reading the literature, I identified some key elements that I wanted to investigate. Historically, women have not comprised a majority of medical school applicants, but their numbers have increased significantly in the last few decades. Why have more U.S. women not pursued medicine? Within my advising practice, I have met many women at orientation who declared pre-med or pre-dental majors, but they disappeared from these programs as they progressed in their undergraduate education. What occurred during their higher-education experience that resulted in their changed career goals? My reflections as well as review of appropriate literature on medical school admissions encouraged me to identify a research question that could be answered by selecting the appropriate design for organizing the study. (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2008)

Reflection is an effective strategy for developing questions that shape a study. Questions must be general enough to allow exploration but focused enough for selecting the correct research design (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). A research design, also referred to as *strategy, framework, tradition, tool,* or *methodology,* "is the logical sequence that connects the empirical data to a study's initial research questions and, ultimately to its conclusions" (Yin, 2003, p. 20). The design provides impetus, structure, and logic to a study that addresses the question (Creswell, 1998; Yin, 2003). When initially developing questions, the practitioner-researcher must make two decisions concerning design: Does the question call for an interpretive design, a quantitative strategy, or a combination of both? If interpretive inquiry is appropriate, which qualitative research design provides direction and focus?

Chapter 7, on quantitative research, offers insight into designs that produce empirical data. Through words, a qualitative design reflects a level of understanding that will explain or describe a phenomenon, process, or concept. An interpretive design belies an assumption that the context and environment of the participants' lived experience provide important clarification and meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The researcher analyzes and interprets words and behaviors to answer the research question with vivid and encompassing descriptions.

Other situations besides personal and professional experiences can result in the development of a research question that requires a qualitative design. For example, after reviewing numeric data from a quantitative method such as a survey, the practitioner-researcher may be inspired or be compelled by others to create questions that increase his or her understanding of the social environment on campus.

In professional and academic literature, other researchers identify queries for further investigation. Some literature elicits questions that, when answered, will allow for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon. Other forms of literature, such as an article in a research journal, might clearly indicate the next question to be addressed in a line of inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Regardless of how she or he arrives at a question, the researcher-practitioner must carefully select the appropriate type of inquiry (qualitative, quantitative, or a mixed method) as well as a research design that will answer the question.

Another important element of a study, the literature review, often helps shape a developing question such that the issue, phenomenon, or problem morphs into a study. Through an extensive search of academic literature, the practitioner-researcher develops an understanding of previous research as well as related topics. Upon completing the review, the practitioner-researcher confirms the importance of the study, identifies gaps in current literature, and creates sources for validating and explaining the findings. Also, the literature review might lead the investigator into a guiding hypothesis that offers further direction for a question as well as a research design (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Qualitative research offers a variety of designs through which the descriptive nature of inquiry remains crucial. It also allows the study to emerge and change through the iterative process of action and reflection. The purpose or focus of a research design is to connect the questions to the findings. Designs include case studies, action research, ethnography, and grounded theory. In this chapter, I provide a brief description of each design as well as a research question or a completed study pertinent to academic advising. Due to the complexity of each design, the practitioner-researcher should refer to cited scholars for further clarification before identifying which design matches his or her own research question.

Case Study

Through a case study, an investigator examines a particular activity, event, or individual within a particular time and place. Bound by context and offering a description or explanation, case study research elucidates many topics in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, law, and medicine. Scholars gather data through observation, interviews, and documents over a period of time. They focus on how and why questions, and they attempt to offer understanding of matters inherent to the specific case (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Schwandt, 2001; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

A question suitable to an academic advising case study might look like the following: How do women of color select majors at an historically Black college or university (HBCU)? The specific activity or case focuses on major selection by women of color. The case is limited by the location at a HBCU. Through this design, the practitioner-researcher attempts to understand and describe the nuances and issues of major selection for women of color within this environment.

Action Research

Action research involves collaboration between the practitioner-researcher and the participants to inform and develop strategies for change. It is based on lived experience and carries other names such as "participatory research," "collaborative action research," or "participatory action research," which are based on nuances to methods employed by the researcher. Practitioner-researchers, who identify a problem, concern, or area needing further explanation to inform an improvement or enhancement, generate questions. The participatory nature emerges as the practitioner-researcher and respondents collaborate beyond data collection to understand the phenomenon being studied. Participants might assist researchers with analysis, review findings and implications, as well as identify and implement change to practices or policies. Shared ownership of research and collaborative analysis of the social problem followed by action to address the issues characterize action research. The practitioner uses the findings to change future practice within academic advising or revise policy within higher education (Greenwood, & Levin, 1998, 2003; Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R., 2003; Schoen, 1983; Yorks, 2005).

On a daily basis across campus, academic advisors interpret and implement policy as they interact with students. Questions and concerns through these interactions might inspire an advisor to initiate a study that requires an action research design. For example, an advisor might ponder about the impact of the late withdrawal policy on students with financial aid and scholarships. Through collaborations

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with students or advising colleagues, the academic advisor gains understanding of policy implications as well as changes that might benefit students. In this manner, the advisor becomes a change agent concerning the policy as well as the practice.

For example, one researcher at a 2-year college in the northeast created a study on faculty-advisor intervention strategies for at-risk students. Over a limited period, 10 faculty advisors agreed to intervene with at-risk students. They engaged early with advisees and recorded the interventions. At the end of the year, a review of the notes and student data by these faculty members resulted in techniques appropriate for intentional interventions with at-risk students (Smith, 2007).

Ethnography

Ethnography emerged from cultural anthropology and sociology in the early 20th century as a strategy to understand the culture of a group of people. This design involves an extended field experience with the "natives," which is an ethnographic term for members of the group being studied. Often transparent or invisible to the natives, culture must be experienced through observation for interpretation and description. The researcher, referred to as an "ethnographer," engages in observations of behaviors of individuals and groups, interviews members to understand meaning behind rituals, and uncovers artifacts embedded within the practices of the group. Based on the fieldwork experience, researchers employ ethnography to explain, without misrepresentation, the culture of a group (Creswell, 1998; Schwandt, 2001; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1987).

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Even though their forerunners focused on people in remote areas of the world, modern ethnographers study groups in all types of locations. Because the questions addressed by this qualitative strategy centers on understanding the culture of a group, ethnographers interpret and analyze language, customs, rituals, and behaviors recorded during fieldwork. Like ethnographers, academic advisors continuously strive to understand the culture of the student populations they serve. Their ethnographic studies could include the cultures of women in medical school; Latinos in science, technology, engineering, and math majors; or students who utilize social networks, such as Facebook.

One current ethnographic study in higher education explained the culture of first-year students. An anthropology faculty member conducted her fieldwork by living in residence halls and enrolling in classes for one year. During this field experience, she observed, recorded, and interpreted the customs, behaviors, and language of people who were "college students." She offers the advisor an interpretation of the culture of students that includes the concepts of building community, academic integration, and cultural competency (Nathan, 2005).

Grounded Theory

Another robust design in qualitative research is grounded theory, which emerged through the discipline of sociology. In this design, the investigator strives to explain or describe a process relating to a phenomenon by developing a new theory grounded in the data collected to address the research question. The design details emerge without boundaries being imposed by established theories or models. The investigator draws data from interviews with participants, observations of elements within the process, and documents that describe the process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Practitioner-researchers who employ this design must be aware of key components.

First, grounded theory is based on analysis known as "coding," a process the investigator initiates while collecting data for the study. Early in the analysis, the researcher uses a "constant comparative method" in which she or he forms hypotheses from data gathered early in the study and then examines and compares these findings with data collected later. During this process, the investigator continually develops theory. Then, the researcher employs a sampling technique called "theoretical sampling" by selecting participants who contribute to theory development based on characteristics relevant to developing hypotheses. Upon reaching the "saturation" point, new data fails to offer additional detail to the evolving theory and the researcher discontinues data collection. As analysis progresses from open coding to axial and then selective coding, the researcher uses an inductive process to place data into categories that define concepts. Finally, the investigator draws relationships between the concepts drawn from these data and articulates a theory that describes a process from the perspective of those who have lived the experience. In addition to explaining the theory through the words of the participants, the scholar will commonly utilize a model or schemata for communicating findings (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss,

needed to identify appropriate methods for data collection, analysis, trustworthiness, as well as consider how I would communicate the results. Andrea drew an analogy between a study and the human body. The research design is the skeleton that gives us form but it is the organs that result in life. The methods would bring life to this study. (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2008)

As my research mentor explained, after choosing a design, the researcher must identify the appropriate methods for data collection: from whom or what source the data will be obtained, how the data will be analyzed, how the findings will be verified, and how the findings are to be reported to colleagues in academic advising. I developed this section to explain the purpose of methods and describe some common techniques utilized by practitioner-researchers. The method selection is an aspect of the iterative process. The selection for sampling informs the data collection method, which in turn affects the choice of analysis method and vice versa. The practitioner-researcher considers all these areas simultaneously to develop a set of methods that are complementary, fit the research design, and address the research question.

Sampling Methods

Sampling is the term used to identify the sources of information from which the researcher collects data. A sample may consist of people, events, settings, or artifacts. In a qualitative study focused on explaining and describing a phenomenon or process, the sample size may be as small as one, but many designs call for an average of 30 participants or a saturation point must be reached before the researcher stops data collection (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). The practitioner-researcher must make two important decisions concerning the sample: the source from which it is developed and the best technique for obtaining it.

The practitioner-researcher must decide whether to draw the sample from people and artifacts at her or his own institution of employment, known as a *convenience sample*, or whether to draw from a site in which she or he has no direct connection. The former is often referred to as "sampling in your backyard" and has some advantages. A backyard study allows for easier access and will be less expensive. The practitioner-researcher will also be inclined to understand the environment (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2002).

Of course, disadvantages will emerge, too. Concerns over confidentiality or the ability to maintain an advising relationship after divulging information may deter some on-campus participants. Also, potential participants, particularly those who know the researcher and the purpose of the study, might use participation as an opportunity to influence policy and practice. Responses meant to please the practitioner-researcher or participants who collaborate so that they relate a common story create biased information. The practitioner-researcher must develop an environment that promotes honesty and trust, and if this climate cannot be achieved on one's own campus, I recommend the selection of an unknown site (see Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, Patton, 2002).

Sampling at an unfamiliar site impacts the study, too. First, the researcher must gain entry to the environment. Often advisors will call upon their colleagues at other institutions to provide this access. Ethnography refers to this individual as the "gatekeeper" because this contact understands the culture the researcher wants to study and can get them into the space (Creswell, 1998). The institutional administration must agree to host the study, and often the IRBs of both the sample institution and home institution must approve the study as well. Once on campus, the practitioner-researcher must advertise for a sample, identify strategies that produce a safe environment for the participants, and find ways to build rapport. These efforts add time and expense to the study, but the resulting data drawn from the sample affect the credibility of the results (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999, Patton, 2002).

Rapport building, a key to interaction between the researcher and the participants, involves many techniques of creating a comfortable site for an interview and creates trust between the researcher and participant. The environment should offer confidentiality as well as attend to personal comfort. Also, the researcher should encourage the participant to select a pseudonym to protect identity, and the researcher uses this name during the interview. The practitioner-researcher must demonstrate the traits of active listening, patience, and avoid passing judgment. Participants share their lived experiences, thus deserve empathy and respect.

The practitioner-researcher must explain his or her multiple identities with respect to the topic and offer reciprocity when appropriate (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). For example, in the study outlined in the chapter vignettes, I extended reciprocity to the women who shared their experiences of deciding to apply to medical school by offering them the