

Common Questions about Qualitative Inquiry

There are many questions commonly asked about qualitative inquiry. Answers clarify some of the other characteristics of the approach. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) address several of these on pages 39-44. As you read these, consider how you feel about their questions and answers in light of your own inquiries in your school setting.

1. Can qualitative and quantitative approaches be used together? Although qualitative and quantitative data can certainly be used together and some people do use data collection designs and procedures together that are often considered to be qualitative (such as naturalistic inquiry) and quantitative (such as surveys), Bogdan and Biklen recommend that beginners not try to do both in the same study. Lincoln and Guba would say that the question of greater importance is whether or not naturalistic and positivistic paradigms can both be used in the same study. A review of the axioms would suggest that they cannot.
2. Is qualitative research really scientific? If scientific inquiry is defined as rigorous and systematic empirical inquiry or disciplined inquiry, then naturalistic/qualitative inquiry is certainly scientific. This is a much broader and more realistic definition of science than many people use, however. It is not scientific if a narrower definition (such

as randomized control treatments to conduct deductive hypothesis-testing studies) is used.

3. How does qualitative research differ from what other people like teachers, reporters, or artists do? Although a qualitative inquirer may do many of the same things these people do (interview, observe, create, write, etc.) they would do their work for different reasons and they would follow the principles of disciplined inquiry.
4. Are qualitative findings generalizable? As indicated above, if generalization means time- and context-free generalizations, which are commonly sought by people using positivistic paradigms, then naturalistic inquiries are not meant to be generalizable. However, if one means that the results of a study may be read by some one and used in their own setting (transferable), then the answer is yes. Qualitative inquiries should be conducted and written so readers can intelligently use the information from them in other settings.
5. What about the researcher's opinions, prejudices, and other biases and their effects on the data? Qualitative inquirers acknowledge that they are subjective by nature, as are all people, including all researchers. They claim that our subjectivity is necessary to understand the subjectivity of the people being studied in an inquiry. However, they use a variety of disciplined inquiry controls (discussed in detail in Chapter Five) to attempt to account for their biases and control for their prejudices.
6. Doesn't the presence of the researcher change the behavior of the people he or she is trying to study? The problem of observer effect exists in all social research (and probably in the supposed hard sciences as well). Qualitative inquirers seek to overcome this influence by

interacting with the people they study as naturally as possible, over long periods of time, without manipulating the situation any more than possible. They also study themselves as the research instrument to try to account for the influence they may be having on the setting.

7. Will two researchers independently studying the same setting or subjects come up with the same findings? Although there would be some concern if two researchers found conflicting results which could not be resolved through negotiations between them, qualitative inquirers expect that two independent researchers would probably look at different things, talk to different people, ask different questions, use different theoretical constructs, and therefore produce different studies altogether. Therefore, they are not likely to come up with the same findings.



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