

Some Common Assumptions

Assumptions and beliefs of inquirers and the people they study influence all our inquiry activities and interpretations. As you think about your own inquiry interests, you should examine your assumptions and beliefs, as well as those of the people you are trying to understand, and how they might shape your studies. To help you, this chapter explores some assumptions commonly made by educational inquirers and the people they study.

Several of these assumptions are illustrated in a teacher preparation project I was involved with at Orem High School's Unified Studies that was mentioned in Chapter 1. A report based on the qualitative inquiry I conducted at Unified Studies is presented in [Appendix A.1 - A Sample Study](#). This report illustrates one way of sharing what is learned through qualitative inquiry with others and some of the many associated assumptions made by the participants in the study.

Before turning to the example though, some of the assumptions traditionally made by qualitative inquirers from several fields are presented briefly.

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Qualitative inquiry is *not* a new idea. This methodology has a long history in several disciplines and has a variety of names. Anthropologists have developed their **ethnographic** methods for many years, into a rigorous and well-accepted science. Sociologists have likewise combined surveying techniques with qualitative approaches to develop the **participant observation** approach of fieldwork. Folklorists, psychologists, linguists, ethnomusicologists, and many others have likewise used and improved this approach to understanding and knowing, using terms such as **case study**, **interpretive inquiry**, and **phenomenology** to label their approach. In literature, **hermeneutics**, **constructivism**, and **narrative** are terms used to reflect this same paradigm.

Although, interest in this approach has developed slowly in educational inquiry, over the last 3-4 decades, discussions regarding the relative strengths of **qualitative** and **quantitative** methods have gained enough interest to affect the practice of researchers and evaluators. Teachers and administrators have also used some of the activities associated with qualitative inquiry without thinking they were doing *research*. More recently, though, educators have begun to realize that the distinction should not be between qualitative and quantitative methods, but between paradigms for inquiry. Paradigms represent conceptualizations of the nature of reality, the relationship between the person trying to know something and the thing they are trying to know, the role of values in inquiry, and other issues. They go far beyond the mere distinction between the description and definition of qualities (qualitative inquiry) and the quantification of those qualities (quantitative inquiry).

In addition to qualitative inquiry, we will investigate the concept and associated methods of **naturalistic inquiry throughout this book**. This is a broad term, which describes a variety of approaches developed by many disciplines (ethnography, participant observation, etc.) and includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. Simply put, naturalistic inquiry is **disciplined inquiry** conducted in natural settings (in the field of interest, not in laboratories), using natural methods (observation, interviewing, thinking, reading, writing) in natural ways by people who have natural interests in what they are studying (practitioners such as teachers, counselors, and administrators as well as full time researchers and evaluators).

The term, disciplined inquiry was coined by Cronbach and Suppes (1969) to encompass several different types of paradigms which may differ significantly in the methods they use and the conceptualizations of reality they represent, but which meet certain critical standards. Some of these characteristics are summarized by Smith and Glass (1987), page 25 as follows:

- a. meaningful topics are addressed [not trivial];
- b. the researchers employ systematic, clearly described procedures so that the reader can closely follow the logic of the study and assess the validity [credibility] of the conclusions;
- c. the researchers are sensitive to the errors that are associated with their methods and seek to control them or consider how the errors influence the results;
- d. empirical verification and sound logic are valued; and
- e. plausible alternative explanations for results are sought.

It is difficult to argue with any of these points. Most qualitative inquirers want to meet these standards to produce results that are disciplined. Criteria have been developed for conducting a qualitative study so that it addresses these standards (discussed in Chapter Three). However, each inquirer must decide how closely they will follow these criteria in light of their circumstances and other assumptions.

Please read the report in Appendix A: A Sample Study and then return to the remainder of this chapter for a discussion of some of the assumptions participants made in that study and that qualitative and naturalistic inquirers regularly make.



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