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Qualitative Research in Counseling: Applying Robust Methods and Illuminating Human Context

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Many doctoral-level counselor education programs remain reluctant to recognize the viability of qualitative research strategies. Lingering bias limits the range of research for many counselor education students, thus restricting the participation of counselors in the associated research discourse. Counselor educators and counseling practitioners need to be literate consumers of field-related research. However, counselor education programs have been relatively slow in recognizing the legitimacy of post positivist research paradigms, even though the current standards of the *Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs* (CACREP, 2001) specifically call for their inclusion.

Unlike some of the other social and behavioral sciences, opportunities for conducting qualitative research in counselor education programs have been relatively recent (Berrios & Lucca, 2006; Levers, Alford, et al., 2002). However, professional counselors regularly deal with critical problems of human existence, and solutions may be advanced through qualitative inquiry. The need therefore exists for greater dissemination of information regarding the qualitative paradigm and its application to the counseling field, as well as

for encouraging greater discourse about the appropriateness of using qualitative methods to investigate counseling related matters.

The aim of this paper is to describe selected qualitative research methods and to illuminate how these apply to counseling. The anticipated outcome is that readers can build upon their knowledge of research, becoming better informed about qualitative strategies and their applications to counseling. Specific objectives include differentiating hypothesis-testing from hypothesis-generating research paradigms, understanding key elements of major qualitative research strategies, and identifying problems for which qualitative methods are appropriately employed and rigorously applied. Nested within our descriptions, we define and explicate common terms and constructs used by qualitative researchers. We offer arguments that support the use of qualitative research methods within the counselor education arena, and we conclude by deriving specific recommendations from these evidence-based arguments.

Positivist and Post Positivist Research Paradigms

Qualitative research is grounded in the assumptions of naturalistic inquiry, which, as Tesch (1990) has stated, "is actually not a type of research, but the label for an entire knowledge producing paradigm" (p. 67). Glesne (2006) points to predispositions of positivist (quantitative) and post positivist (qualitative) inquiry that differ on their respective emphases upon basic assumptions, research purposes, research approach, and researcher role.

Quantitative research methods are hypothesis-testing, whereas qualitative research methods are hypothesis-generating. Research questions that lend themselves to quantitative methods presume *a priori* knowledge about a set of variables; enough is known about the variables that a hypothesis can be constructed from this knowledge. Questions aim to determine: "What kind?", "How Many?", and "What is the relationship?" However, research questions that lend themselves to qualitative methods do not presume the same *a priori* level of knowledge; in fact, in many qualitative inquiries, so little is known about the phenomenon at hand that variables also are unknown. Qualitative investigations, therefore, do not begin with the identification of variables and testing of hypotheses; but rather, they explore a phenomenon within a particular context and end by generating hypotheses about new knowledge. Research questions in qualitative inquiries tend to answer "How?" or "Why?" or to describe in depth. Qualitative research, therefore, is a knowledge producing endeavor; unlike quantitative research, it does not aim to *prove* or *disprove* a hypothesis.

Research Design

Congruence between selected qualitative methodology and the theoretical framework of an articulated inquiry is essential in designing research. Overall design and choice of methodology, in any investigation, are integrally dependent upon the nature of the research question. In turn, within the qualitative research paradigm, data collection methods need to be harmonious with the overall research design and its theoretical

framework.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection represents one stage of a larger process; as Creswell (2007) has emphasized, qualitative data collection is not a discreet and separate task, but rather, "…a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions" (p. 118). Qualitative researchers face many challenges while collecting data and are called upon to make numerous context-dependent decisions. Here qualitative and quantitative paradigms differ dramatically; qualitative methods are not nearly as formulaic and require many decisions on the part of the researcher, thus demanding that the researcher is well grounded in the theories that frame the inquiry. Qualitative data collection strategies cover a wide spectrum of methods and involve many theoretical perspectives across disciplines. They include participant observation, interviews, focus groups, and unobtrusive means of research; they may be used quite differently across methodologies.

Data Management

Data management is a challenging aspect of qualitative research, due to the enormous amounts of data often collected. It is important to consider this early in the design process, taking methods of coding and data analysis into account, in an effort toward congruity with other aspects of the research design.

Coding . Coding involves categorizing, and, ultimately, making meaning of qualitative data. Numerous methods for coding qualitative data include open, conceptual, thematic, axial, generative, and selective coding. Some methods of coding are more highly resonant with their larger methodological frameworks than are others.

Using Software in Analyzing Qualitative Data . Since the advent of personal computer technology, a number of useful software programs have emerged, responding to the unique needs of qualitative researchers (Denardo & Levers, 2002; Tesch, 1990). Examples are NVivo, Ethnograph, MAXqda2, ATLAS.ti, and HyperRESEARCH.

Data Analysis

Within the qualitative research paradigm, distinctions between data collection and analysis often are relatively seamless. Analysis is a highly iterative and recursive process that typically begins with data collection, continues through interpretation and discussion phases, and maintains a fluid interrelationship throughout. For this reason, it is important for researchers to consider and plan for analysis during the earliest stages of research design. Transforming and interpreting raw data, in praxis, to generate or illuminate new knowledge, is the daunting task of qualitative data analysis.

Selected Qualitative Methods

A number of qualitative research methods are relevant to counseling and to exploring human context. The applications of these methods share the advantage of researchers purposefully involving co-researchers in exploring the human context of inquiries. General limitations spanning these methods include the possibility of researcher bias, massive data collection, and lack of generalizability. We have drawn upon research theory and application to offer the following brief synopses regarding selected research strategies.

Action Research

Action research provides researchers with unique opportunities to participate and collaborate with research subjects, also called stakeholders. The purpose of action research is to address specific needs and facilitate change. Berg (2007, p. 225) identifies a "basic action research procedural routine [that] involves four stages, emphasizing that the researcher and subjects share responsibility for engaging in each step." Berg's stages include identifying the research questions, gathering information, analyzing and interpreting data, and sharing results with participants. During these stages, researchers and stakeholders are integrally involved in all aspects of the research process.

Case Study

Case studies provide rich, detailed descriptions, perhaps of one person, a group of people sharing commonalities or experiences, an event, a set of documents, or an institution (Berg, 2007). This method uses various information-gathering techniques (Glesne, 2006) to increase trustworthiness, such as interviews and focus groups. Researchers view the process and examine the data holistically, and information is gathered that otherwise would not have been discovered through other less intensive strategies.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is an unobtrusive and cost-effective method used across disciplines. It involves "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Berg, 2007, pp. 303-304). Researchers examine previously recorded messages or communications (e.g., oral, written, videotaped) primarily using classing and categorical coding. Qualitative content analysis may involve interpretive, social anthropological, and collaborative approaches; one variation of this is ethnographic content analysis (Levers, 2001). This investigative strategy is effective in finding trends over periods of time.

Dramaturgy

The goal of dramaturgy is to enable the audience to more fully understand the situation of the interviewees, allowing participants "to explore and examine, through dramatic devices, what it is like from the inside looking out" (Glesne, 2006, p. 205). Researchers reconstruct their collected data into dramatic performances. Cochran (1986) highlights five dramatic principles of dramaturgical work relating contextually to actors, meaning,

agency, ecology, and interrelationship.

Ethnographic Research

Ethnography covers a number of qualitative strategies, methods, and mindsets, evolving from anthropology. Because it was one of the earliest approaches, the term *ethnographic* has been used interchangeably with *qualitative* research (Glesne, 2006). Ethnography is defined most clearly by Berg (2007) as a practice that "places researchers in the midst of whatever it is they study" (p. 172). Ethnographic researchers enter the field with intentions of accessing the everyday experiences of the participants indigenous to that environment. Strategies include interviewing, listening, filming, recording, and collecting documents. The goal of ethnographic research is to produce a detailed description of the culture of interest.

Grounded theory

Grounded theory was originated by sociologists Strauss and Glaser (1967) and primarily has been used in investigations of social processes and interactions. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 158) refer to this approach as "a *general methodology* for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed." This method is particularly helpful when there is no existing theory that can explain a particular social process or interaction. Data are collected and examined in ways that seek to discover new theories in the patterns that emerge from the data. Traditional grounded theory is highly systematic, requiring that researchers use specific strategies for coding and analyzing data. Alternatively, Charmaz (2006) has promoted a less structured method for conducting constructionist grounded theory research, relying upon more interpretive perspectives.

Historiography

Historiography allows for creating meaningful and vital narratives from the past. Berg (2007, p. 264) defines it as "a method of discovering, from records and accounts, what happened during some past period, but it is not simply fact-centered; rather, historiography seeks to offer theoretical explanations for various historical events." Individual lives, groups, institutions, and epochs are recalled and assembled into a cohesive framework that permits unseen aspects of the past to be illuminated in the present.

Oral History

Oral History is the systematic and deliberate collection of information about past events, skills, cultures, traditions, and ways of life that individuals have experienced first-hand. The intent is to gather information, through formal and deliberate interviews, regarding important, unique, or ordinary events in individuals' lives to provide enriching accounts of the past (Glesne, 2006). Oral history is spoken history that preserves eyewitness accounts of events. It provides a public voice for those who historically have been

invisible, absent, ignored, or under-represented. The use of oral history provides for powerful research that enriches or reconstructs our understandings of personal histories.

Phenomenological Research

Merleau-Ponty once said, “Phenomenology is the study of essences” (1962, p. vii), explaining “essence” as a description of a phenomenon. The essence of phenomenological qualitative research lies in the notion of the lived experience. Phenomenological research attempts to capture the lived experiences of people in textual expression. How human beings situate themselves in the world and the elaboration of its meaning for them is phenomenology’s driving force (Van Manen, 1990). The philosophy of phenomenology has been in existence since the early 1700s. Husserl is known as a major developer of phenomenology. Other more contemporary philosophers, notably Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, have helped to expand the movement. Phenomenology focuses on the language, symbols, and icons of lived experience; perception and experience are joined to make meaning of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990).

Applications to Human Context

Qualitative methodology allows for illuminating the human context of numerous themes important to counseling. One such theme is that of diversity, as it intersects with dimensions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual identity, and disability issues. Qualitative inquiry has enabled counseling-related research, for example, on issues of race (e.g., Levers, Mosley, et al., 2002), gender (e.g., Levers, 2002), class (e.g., Kastberg, 2007; Kastberg & Miller, 1996), culture (e.g., Levers, 2002, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; Levers, Kamanzi, Mukamana, Pells, & Bhusumane, 2006), disability (e.g., Levers, 2001), and spirituality (e.g., Brent, 1994), through the robust application of qualitative research methods to issues of culture.

Qualitative inquiry allows for knowledge production about dimensions of human existence that have not yet been explored adequately. Qualitative strategies can capture the essence of lived experience. Qualitative investigations can enhance our understandings of and illuminate the subtleties inherent in the human condition in ways that statistical measures simply cannot. However, the differing assumptions of positivist and post positivist paradigms need not be viewed as polemical; rather, they are different ways of approaching problem sets, depending upon epistemological and ontological aspects of the question. In many ways, the qualitative paradigm serves particular strands of counseling, including those concerned with humanistic, existential, psychodynamic, and cognitive-emotive clinical orientations, as well as those counselor educators and supervisors concerned with constructivist pedagogical perspectives.

Recommendations for Counselor Education

Many counselor educators have been trained within a purely positivist paradigm; as expected, their visions of research possibilities may be limited to hypotheses that can be tested statistically and to conclusions that are definitively proven. A more post positivist

vision of counseling entertains a multi-disciplinary and diverse professional identity, one that can tolerate and accommodate the examination of the human condition from alternative epistemological and ontological perspectives. We therefore recommend that counselor educators engage in interdisciplinary discourse about research that contextualizes human experience, events, and concerns. This perhaps begins with genuine dialogue among counselor educators, and with their students, about the nature of qualitative methodology. Many myths have been perpetuated about qualitative research by counselor educators who do not understand the paradigm.

We recommend that the major counseling journals be more proactive in their publication of qualitative studies. While our journals have become a bit more open in this regard, over the last couple of decades, there is still a dearth of qualitative investigations represented in our literature. Perhaps more editorial board members versed in the application of qualitative methods could help to ameliorate this situation.

Finally, in academic arenas where qualitative research is tolerated or encouraged, we encourage those scholars who choose to engage in qualitative inquiry to do so with a commitment to rigor. Many studies have been conducted, both of a qualitative and a quantitative ilk, which are not as rigorously designed and carried out as would be desired. Rigor is the responsibility of the researcher, and this only can be achieved by applying the most robust research method possible that is concordant with the nature of the study.

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