# QUALITATIVE RESEARCH : HISTORICAL RESEARCH DESIGN

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Qualitative inquiry in education connotes a subjective process of understanding and assessing educational phenomena. It would be contradictory to argue that what follows represents an accurate description of the qualitative method or details the exact nature of history as a form of qualitative inquiry. Indeed, if we view the purpose of qualitative inquiry as a quest to gain understanding, there is no qualitative method per se, only methods to gather information with which we construct our qualitative understanding. In Habits of The Heart, a trenchant critique of individualism in American life, Robert Bellah (1985) and his colleagues argue that we have largely lost the language necessary to make moral sense out of our private and public lives. Only older forms of moral discourse-forms that see the individual in relation to a larger whole, a community and a tradition-can provide what the authors describe as 'communities of memory', that is, those things that will sustain and nurture both private and public life. Qualitative inquiry may be seen as a form of moral discourse. By qualitatively exploring 'communities of memory' we learn to understand ourselves in relation to the larger world; we learn that we are inexorably entwined with both the past and the present. Thus, qualitative inquiry leads to qualitative understanding. Qualitative understanding, in turn, serves to condition the range and quality of human thought and may help to restore those moral dimensions of thought and practice.

**Purpose:**

- Qualitative inquiry plays an important role in educational research by assisting us in raising new questions, by leading us to question assumptions, by cultivating an appreciation for complexity, and finally, by expanding our frames of reference. In short, qualitative inquiry enhances the critical and intellectual dimensions of human thought and enables researchers to view themselves in relation to the larger world.

Consider the issue of asking new questions. We undertake qualitative inquiry not so much from our recognition that we do not know all the answers to our problems but rather from an appreciation of the fact that we do not know all the questions. It is not surprising that there is widespread agreement with the truism that the world is full of the right answers to bad questions, for not only are good questions hard to raise, but it is even harder to question that which is the most obvious. Qualitative inquiry offers an antidote to this pathology: by making the familiar strange, by turning familiar facts into puzzles, qualitative inquiry can, in the words of Herbert Kliebard and Barry Franklin (1983), 'serve to heighten our critical sensibilities and thereby help us to reformulate our problems in fresh and constructive ways' (p. 153).

- Qualitative inquiry also expands our understanding of research by making us conscious of our assumptions and by fostering an appreciation for complexity. Everyone operates from assumptions, and educational researchers are no exception.

The danger, however, lies not in having assumptions but rather in not being aware of them. One hallmark of a qualitative approach is that it causes us to acknowledge our assumptions so that we can suspend beliefs in these familiar convictions and examine evidence in a new and productive manner. From an enlarged awareness of how our own assumptions may limit our understanding comes a growing appreciation of complexity. Qualitative inquiry seeks to make phenomena more complex-not simpler-for complexity, not simplicity, describes life in both the past and the present.

- Finally qualitative inquiry informs our understanding of educational research by expanding our frames of reference. Qualitative approaches to research, for example, provide a means of counteracting the extreme rationalization of researchers in the logical-positivist tradition and helps us to question the search for universal and eternal generalizations. By changing the set of lenses through which we view the world, we come to recognize, in the words of Kenneth Burke, that 'a way of seeing is always a way of not seeing' (quoted in Tyack, 1976). By raising questions, challenging assumptions, embracing complexity, and expanding our frames of reference, qualitative inquiry provides educational researchers with an important lesson: knowledge that our understanding as individuals and our ability to understand as researchers is limited.

**Features:**

- Qualitative research is context-specific, that is, it posits that ideas, people, and events cannot be understood if isolated from their contexts. Unlike researchers in the physical sciences and in some of the social sciences, researchers employing qualitative methods do not seek to examine phenomena in ways that are context-free or context-independent.

- In addition to context, a second common concern of qualitative methodology is that research should take place in natural settings as opposed to abstract or theoretical settings. Although theoretical contexts or models assist researchers to relate previously unrelated phenomena, actual experiences in natural settings have too many variables to be susceptible to singular models of explanation.

- A third hallmark of qualitative approaches to research is that experience is studied as a whole, not in isolation from the past or the present. Qualitative researchers seek to understand as closely as possible experience as it was actually lived and understood and attempt to discern relationships between those experiences. Being concerned with the wholeness of experience, however, does not mean that qualitative research merely attempts to document all that can be known about an event or an individual in relation to the larger world. Rather, such experiences become 'relevant only when interpreted in terms of a frame of reference that can encompass them and give form and shape to a conception of the whole' (Bellah et al, 1985, p. 300).

- The fourth hallmark of qualitative approaches to research, therefore, is a shared concern for interpreting experience and explaining its significance. Put simply, experiences do not speak for themselves; likewise, there is no preexisting or determinate order that encompasses all experience. Qualitative researchers must employ an interpretive frame of reference in order to bring meaning to experience. In this sense, qualitative inquiry is not merely a search for knowledge for knowledge's sake, but a search for the significance of knowledge.

**Historical Research Design:**

Historical inquiry seeks to interpret and explain the significance of past experiences, not merely to document them. As historical facts do not speak for themselves, the past becomes relevant to the present only through interpretation and evaluation. Without these shared concerns of qualitative inquiry in general, historians' preoccupation with the past becomes mere antiquarianism. Interpretation and evaluation of past experiences enable historians to fashion arguments designed to bring meaning to experience. History means interpretation; interpretation implies argument. As Theodore White (1978) explained, 'Good reporters organize facts in "stories", but good historians organize lives and episodes into "arguments" ' (p. 2).

Interpretation involves judgment, but a particular kind of judgment. It is not the historian's task to pass value judgments when interpreting the past, because moral assessments of the past in terms of good or bad inevitably reflect the moral conventions of the present rather than those of yesteryear. The type of judgments central to historical interpretations are ones that seek to explain how things could have happened-not whether they were good or bad. Historians interpret the past, therefore, in terms of the contemporaneous standards and conditions then prevailing, not in comparison with the present day.

According to **Borg & Gall (1996),** subject of historical research embraces the following:

- General educational history
- History of educational legislation
- Biography of contributors to education
- Institutional history of education like primary education, secondary education, higher education, distance education, non-formal education, adult education and so on
- Cultural history of education related to fields of sociology, anthropology, literature and technology
- History of educational planning and policy formulation
- Historical critics of education

## Sources of Data:

Data related to past events are available through the following sources:

- Primary Sources

- Secondary Sources

**Primary Sources**

These sources provide first hand information about past events.

Direct observation and reporting/recording of experiences can be treated as a primary source of data.

Different types of primary sources are as follows:

- Personal sources: Personal observation of events in which he/she participated in the past
- Physical artefacts: Collections in museums, evidences of historical spots in the form of remains of relics, institutions of various types
- Mechanical artefacts: Films, video films, audio cassettes, photographs
- Verbal testimony/records: Written by actual participants/observers in form of constitutions, charters, court decisions, official minutes, records, autobiographies, diary entries, personal journal entries, deeds, letters, receipts, wills, permits, licenses, certificates, newspaper accounts [arhival], maps, pictures, books on matter experienced by self, etc.

**Secondary Sources**

- Second-hand information about past events [Eg.: information given a person who was neither a witness of or participant in the past event].
- Any of the following data that was recorded on the basis of study of primary sources-
  a. Newspaper articles
  b. Interviews referred to in scholarly articles
  c. Magazine articles , books or research reports created on the basis of primary data

**AUTHENTICATION**

It is very important to verify authenticity of data collected through different sources.

The following are verified:

- Validity
- Reliability
- Relevance

The mode of verification comprise of-

- External Criticism
- Internal Criticism

# External Criticism

It is called **LOWER CRITICISM.**

It is related to testing the authenticity and genuineness of sources of data.

It helps to determine whether the data is authentic and saves the researcher from fraud.

General criteria followed by External Criticism depend on –

- Good sense of chronology, versatile intellect, common sense, good understanding of human behaviour, patience , persistence
- Contemporary reputation of the source
- Consistent reputation of the source over the years

Such information can be traced through literature review, testing of signatures, testing handwriting, scripts, style of writing, language, usage etc. Physical and chemical tests can be done for verification of in, paint, cloth, paper, metal, wood etc.

# Internal Criticism

After the sources of data are duly verified for genuineness, internal criticism is done.

It is called **HIGHER CRITICISM.**

**It is concerned with – validity, credibility and worth of the content of the document.**

- *Internal Consistency* is determined. Literal and Real /deeper meaning of the data is studied. Greater internal consistency means greater accuracy.
- *External Consistency* is then determined. Even if data is found to be accurate, the report may posit distorted version/picture of the past events. The steps followed for the verification are-
  - *a.* Compare information derived through two independent sources
  - *b.* Match information with the information already available with reliable sources

**FOX (1969) suggested following principles for verification of external consistency:**

- Corroboration of data from 2 independent sources
- One independent primary source
- No source reputed/notorious for providing contradictory information on any event

# MAIN STEPS

*a.* ***Determining the Problem***
*b.* ***Specifying Population of Data***
*c.* ***Data Collection***
*d.* ***Organisation of Data***
*e.* ***Interpretation of Data***
*f.* ***Report Writing***

a.    Determining the Problem

Borg & Gall (1996) have suggested the following topics that are usually included in the area of historical research-

- Historical studies concerning current issues of social significance like education of marginalised or special needs children, women's education etc.
- History of educational figures/persons with contribution to education, history of instt., history of educational movements
- Interpretation of events or ideas which so long had been treated as unrelated. Eg. Linking educational development with sustainable ecological development/socio-economic development of a region
- Synthesizing old data with new facts to modify or rewrite a theory
- Reinterpretation of past events that call for reassessment in new light against background of changing circumstances or agencies

b.    Specifying Population of Data

Though huge amount of data and information may be available about a past event the researcher has to specify the type of data that would be relevant for the study. The type of data like sociological/psychological/historical/economic data is to be determined as everything cannot be useful for a particular study.

c.    Data Collection

The following must be followed for proper data collection ofr historical research –

- Researcher should be familiar with all data
- He should not be confined only to sources of data and be ready for exploring new data from existing sources [Primary/secondary].

- Researcher should prepare to exercise care in exploring new type of dataas well as previously known data in the context of the area under investigation.

d.    Organisation of Data

A draft outline is to be prepared after data collection and authentication. Data is organised under relevant headings and a comprehensive picture of the problem is developed.

This enables the researcher to scrutinize data in hand to see if the collected data collected is enough for the study or more data is needed.

e.    Interpretation of Data

Description of events is specific framework is done.

The underlying/ causal/intervening forces that have shaped the events are analysed in detail.

So a sound knowledge of the various affecting fields like sociology/political science/economics/policy/psychology/educational management/ educational technology etc. is needed.

Implications are derived.

Holistic view of the situation /event is presented through detailed analysis.

Interaction between interpretations, selection of additional data, and subsequent interpretation are done to reach an understanding of the research findings.

Systematic and comprehensive report can be generated on the basis of this interpretation.

f.    Report Writing

Systematic ad structured presentation of analysis and interpretation along with complete research methodology and purpose with due discussion of implications of findings in present context and future directions is created. Ideas and insights are systematically presented based on interaction of data, insight and various agencies directly or indirectly involved.