Resources for Chapter 7

Examples of case studies (p.156)


Hrastinski, S. (2006). The relationship between adopting a synchronous medium and participation in online group work: An explorative study. *Interactive Learning Environments, 14*(2), 137-152. doi:10.1080/10494820600800240 This case study examined whether a synchronous communication medium, instant messaging (IM), enabled students to participate more actively in online group work. Data were collected using diaries, questionnaires and interviews. (comparative case study involving four groups)


Sørensen, A. (2003). Backpacker ethnography. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 30(4), 847-867. doi:10.1016/S0160-7383(03)00063-X. An ethnographic study of the travel culture of international backpackers based on participant observation. Eight spells of fieldwork, spanning from two to seven months covered East Africa, India, the Middle East, North Africa, and South-East Asia, while Europe was included in numerous brief forays into the backpacker scene.


Walsh, D. J. (2007). A birth centre's encounters with discourses of childbirth: How resistance led to innovation. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 29(2), 216-232. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9566.2007.00545.x. An exploration of the culture, beliefs, values, customs and practices around the birth process within a free-standing birth centre. Participant observation was undertaken over a nine-month period including all hours of the day and all days of the week. An opportunistic sample of women was interviewed approximately three months after giving birth at the centre. A purposive sample of midwives representing a breadth of clinical experience, was also interviewed.
Cranham, J., & Carroll, A. (2003). Dynamics within the bully/victim paradigm: A qualitative analysis. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 19*(2), 113-132. doi:10.1080/02667360303235 Examines whether high school students ethically justify bullying behaviour within a school context. Ten students, purposefully selected because of their specific roles within the bully/victim paradigm, participated in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis using the constant comparative method associated with grounded theory revealed complex social structures that existed within the purposefully selected sample.


Rausch, J., & Hamilton, M. (2006). Goals and distractions: Explanations of early attrition from traditional university freshmen. *The Qualitative Report, 11*(2), 317-334. A grounded theory study designed to investigate the factors that influenced 20 ‘traditional’ university freshmen to withdraw prior to the end of their first year at two Midwestern US universities. A two-hour audio-taped interview was conducted with each of the participants, and the data analyzed using the grounded theory method.

Rolandsson, M., Hallberg, L. R-M., & Hugoson, A. (2006). Influence of the ice-hockey environment on taking up snuff: an interview study among young males. *Acta Odontologica Scandinavica, 64*(1), 47-54. doi:10.1080/00016350500419891 The study sample comprised 16 male participants between 15 and 32 years of age strategically selected for being active or having been active as ice-hockey players, including both snuff-users and non-users. A grounded theory design including in-depth interviews was used to generate a theory from data.

model of pregnancy protection which accounted for variation of contraceptive use across the sample.

Steinman, M. A., Bero, L. A., Chren, M-M., & Landefeld, C. S. (2006). Narrative review: The promotion of gabapentin: An analysis of internal industry documents. *Annals of Internal Medicine, 145*(4), 284-293. doi:10.7326/0003-4819-145-4-200608150-00008 Analysis of the promotion of a new pharmaceutical product through a review of publicly available documents arising from legal cases. They comprised a mix of internal correspondence and reports; programs, presentations, and transcripts from activities sponsored by the drug company; correspondence between them and outside vendors and physicians; excerpted depositions of their employees and court documents. The documents were reviewed using the principles of grounded theory.
Narrative research

The term ‘narrative’ carries many meanings and is used in different ways in different disciplines. It is often used as a synonym for ‘story’. Riessman (2005) complains that in everyday use, narrative has become little more than metaphor – everyone has her ‘story’ – a rising trend linked to the use of the term in popular culture: telling one’s ‘story’ on television, or at a self-help group meeting. Missing for the narrative scholar is analytic attention to how the facts got assembled that way. For whom was this story constructed, how was it made, and for what purpose? What cultural resources does it draw on – take for granted? What does it accomplish? Are there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest alternative counter-narratives? In popular usage, a ‘story’ seems to speak for itself, not requiring interpretation – an indefensible position for serious scholarship.

(p. 393, emphasis in original)

She emphasizes that not all talk and text are narrative, and that storytelling is only one genre. There are other forms of discourse as well as narrative, including chronicles, reports, arguments and question and answer exchanges (Riessman, 2008). Among social researchers there is a range of definitions of narrative. In social history and anthropology it typically refers to an entire life story, based on interviews, observations, and documents. In psychology and sociology the narrative often incorporates long sections of talk, leading to extended accounts of lives, developing over the course of a single or multiple interviews. An extreme is provided by research in sociolinguistics where a ‘story’ can refer to an answer to a single question, topically-centered and temporally-organized (e.g. Labov, 1982 who analyzed tape-recorded answers to a question about a violent incident).

Notwithstanding this diversity of working definitions of narrative, the features distinguishing narrative from other forms of discourse are a focus on sequence and consequence. Events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (Hinchman and Hinchman, 1997). Analysis in narrative studies interrogates language - how and why events are storied, not simply the content to which language refers (Riessman, 2008).

Narratives contain people’s perceptions and, often, their own interpretations of meaning derived
from lived realities. Pavlish (2007) points out that this means that ‘narratives offer data that have already been interpreted by the narrator before the researcher even reaches the data analysis phase of the research process.’ (p. 29). Such subjectivity is often deeply distrusted in the social sciences, but it is precisely because of this subjectivity - their ‘rootedness in time, place, and personal experience ....that we value them' (Personal Narratives Group 1989, pp. 263–264). As Lawler (2002) concluded, ‘The truths people produce through such stories are not “truths” as conventionally understood by positivist social science: nevertheless, they do speak certain “truths” about people’s (socially located) lives and identities’ (p. 254).

Biographical or Life History Research

This may be thought of as a particular kind of case study where the ‘case’ studied is an individual person. The intention is to tell the story of a person’s life. This is a well-established genre of literary endeavour covering virtually all kinds of different lives (historical, political etc) which may not aspire to be a form of social science research. However there is no reason why biographical or life history research should not have the characteristics of a flexible design study

One such format is the ‘interpretive’ biography (Denzin, 2001) where the intention is to interpret a person’s life through telling their ‘story’. Generally this is done by using documents and records, together with interviews and conversations when the person is still alive. If possible this is backed up by observation of the subject over a period of time, together with interviews with friends, (enemies?) and colleagues.

The bases for selection of a subject can be many and varied. They include both lives of the ‘great and the good’ and those whose lives, otherwise unremarked, shed light on aspects of society and culture. Biography is, probably, an unlikely approach to be taken in a real world study. Apart from technical problems such as the extended time-scale needed to produce a rigorous and systematic study, it is doubtful that it will provide answers to research questions directly relevant to the kind of issues and problems found in real world research. However, life history has become increasingly popular with researchers investigating educational topics of all kinds, including teachers’ perceptions and experiences of different areas of their lives and careers, curriculum and subject development, pedagogical practice and managerial concerns (Goodson, 2001)
Roberts (2002) provides more detail and discusses different versions of the biographical approach including autobiography. One variant is auto-ethnography where the researcher himself becomes the primary subject of the research in the process of writing personal stories and ethnographic narratives (Ellis, 2004).

Phenomenological research

Phenomenological research focuses on the subjective experience of the individuals studied. What is their experience alike? How can one understand and describe what happens to them from their own point of view? As the term suggests at its heart is the attempt to understand some phenomenon. This might be, for example, the experience of a child with disabilities in a mainstream (or segregated) school classroom.

Phenomenology has its roots in the philosophy of Husserl (1900/1970); see Giorgi, (2005) for a short introduction. Moustakas (1994) and Cohen et al. (2000) provide detailed discussions. It has been influential in several social sciences as well as applied fields such as nursing and the health sciences (Holloway and Wheeler, 2002, chapter 11) and has had a major influence on the general development of qualitative methodology. Phenomenology provides the philosophical basis for interpretive research strategies including ethnomethodology and conversational analysis (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). There is also an extensive literature on psychological phenomenology and in particular how research can be carried out along these lines (e.g. Langdridge, 2007).

However there are considerable barriers in the way of a novice seeking to use this approach. There is a highly specialized vocabulary and it is argued that a solid grounding in some challenging philosophy is called for. However, Porter (2008) suggests that one can ‘jettison the baroque intricacies of high phenomenology and just use its simple basic assumptions’ which he sees (in a health context) as ‘trying to uncover, and possibly explain, people’s experiences of health, illness, and care’. Hence ‘Beyond arguing for the importance of those experiences over and above the objective manifestations of disease, disability, and treatment, what more do we need by way of philosophical foundation?’ (p. 268). Whatever view taken about the necessity of a philosophical underpinning the general approach has much to offer in answering certain kinds of research question about subjective experience, which may be highly relevant to some real world studies.
Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the 'art and science of interpretation'. Its main initial use was by theologians in interpreting religious texts so that they were meaningful to a society very different from the one in which they were originally written. Bentz and Shapiro (1998, p.105) cite the American use of hermeneutics in contemporary life in the interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. A term such as 'freedom of speech' needs to be translated from an eighteenth century context to the present situation. How, for example, do we apply the concept to speech broadcast via radio and television? Various levels of interpretation are called for. What were the writers’ intentions? What has been the history of the concept? How have contextual changes led to a reinterpretation of the concept?

As all social science research involves interpretation, insights gained from hermeneutics are relevant to many aspects of the research process. Reason and Rowan (1981) point out that hermeneutics is just one example of the process whereby people make sense of their world. As all understanding takes place in time and a particular culture, a lesson from hermeneutics is that the prejudgments we bring to this process are to some extent culturally predetermined.

While hermeneutics was originally concerned with the interpretation of 'text' taken in a literal sense, it is now applied more widely to include conversations, interactions between people in different settings, and even fashion. Arnett (2007) argues for it as a useful addition to the range of qualitative approaches in communication research generally.

When your main research task is the interpretation of text (considered in a broad sense) there are several hermeneutic strategies worth considering. For example, hermeneutics would maintain that the closer one is to the source of the text the more valid your interpretation is likely to be (which is of course in sharp distinction to the positivist stance of ‘distance’ from the object being studied). Mothers of infants can interpret their language much more readily than outsiders.

A central feature is the ‘dialogic’ nature of hermeneutic enquiry. The text is returned to time and time again. Initial understandings are refined through interpretation; this then raises further questions calling for a return to the text and revision of the interpretation. Throughout this process one is trying to understand what it means to those who created it and to integrate that meaning with its meaning to us. Hermeneutics has contributed to qualitative research methodology the notion of an active involvement by the researcher in the research process. It has been put forward as a
useful approach to research focussing on professional practice (Paterson and Higgs, 2005) and in other applied research (e.g. Wallace, Ross and Davies, 2003).

It is a difficult method to follow both procedurally and because of the tensions between being closely embedded in the context and process of explanation, and the research need to be honest and balanced. As with other qualitative approaches this can be addressed by providing detailed accounts of the research process so that it is possible to guard against suspicions of basing the interpretation on a selective and biased reading. A more detailed account and a range of examples are provided by Bentz and Shapiro (1998; pp. 105-114).

Hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches are sometimes bracketed together as ‘hermeneutic phenomenological’ (e.g. Cohen et al., 2000: Evans and Hallett, 2007 who present a hermeneutic phenomenological study of the work of hospice nurses). Popularity of the approach in health related research, particularly nursing research, has led to consideration of appropriate quality and ethical standards for this type of research (e.g. Annells, 2006; deWitt and Ploeg, 2006).

References


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Goodall, H. L. (2008). *Writing qualitative inquiry: Self, stories, and academic life*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. Focus on how to tell interesting stories - and how to convince others that they are interesting. Welcome focus on how to write and how to get published. It is in part a writing manual and and career guide.

Hesse-Biber, S., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research.* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. Covers all the key mainstream qualitative methods, as well as a number of more unconventional ones such as oral history, visual and unobtrusive methods, with examples drawn from across the social sciences.


Seale, C., Silverman, D., Gubrium, J. F., & Gobo, G. (Eds.) (2007). *Qualitative research practice.* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. New edition of an extensive compendium where researchers recount and reflect on their own research experiences as well as others, past and present, from whom they have learned.