**My Learnings About Qualitative Research as a Practitioner Scholar**

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**Introduction**

I entered into this course with a very clear idea of what I knew and what I needed to learn. I felt I had a basic understanding of what qualitative research was and just needed to learn how to do it. This notion proved false within the first week of class when we began to read about the difference between qualitative and quantitative research. It became clear that my understandings about qualitative research were incomplete and full of misconceptions.

Through reading about each part of the process, looking closely at examples, and making meaning out of the two through discussion, qualitative research analysis papers, and community of practice activities I gained many insights each week. I went from moments of extreme clarity to confusion to comfort within the confusion. At first, each week felt like an isolated block of content I tried to focus on and make sense of and slowly I began to make connections between the texts across the semester and view the content more cohesively. Now, as I look back on my engagement with the course as a whole I find three main themes emerge. Realizing qualitative research is not just an alternative to quantitative; it stands alone as its own genre of research with specific standards, goals, and uses.  Research inherently involves issues of power we should be open and reflective about. Research is about learning and sharing, not testing and proving. These are separate themes, yet interrelated and a product of how I began to understand the content of each week on its own as well as identify what connects each piece of the research puzzle. Each theme was present while learning about each part of the qualitative research process, but certain ones came through more prominently depending on the text, discussion around the texts, and our engagement with the practice activities. Through examining my learning about each part of the research process, I am able to see how engagement with this course led to these three main understandings that will guide me as I continue to grow as a practitioner scholar.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Early on in the course we read the defintion of conceptual framework offered by Ravitch and Riggan (2017) “a conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p.5). While it was my second time reading that definiton since I was first exposed to it in the summer courses, it was the first time I began to think of it as a defining characteristic of qualitative reserach. This second look at Ravitch and Riggan(2017) laid the foundation for my first major take-away from the course; qualitative resereach is its own unique genre that is not more or less valid than quantitative methods, rather it has different intentions and implications. I realized in the first week of the course that I was a product of what Cox (2012) and Sallee and Flood (2012) state about educational institutions favoring quantitative methods due to their efficency and perceived validity.

Due to this elevation of quantitative research, I did not have a full understanding of qualitative reserach and realized I subconsciously considered it less rigorous because there is less math. After the first week of readings brought out this misconception and began to break it down I was left wondering what truly makes research qualitative. The detailed and ongoing study of the conceptual framework helped me answer that question. I began to see that I was conflating the ‘flexible nature’ of qualitative research with the idea that it is free from structure. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) enlightened me to how the conceptual framework is structured, yet flexible and evolving. The analogy of connected lenses they offer really resonated with me and I point out in week four how it helped show me that each part of the framework had its own character, but the framework itself is about the commonthread among each part. It also helped me understand that it is not simply about each piece blending together and that each part or ‘lens’ has its own protocal, some more structured and formulaic than others.

For example, when we read about the literature review I discovered how much procedure is apart of the process as evidenced by my response to the readings in week six where I share how “I realized how many misconceptions I carried about the research process. I saw it as this lone search through the woods hoping for clarity and discovery, but am increasingly seeing how little we can learn from a process like that. In reality it is a collaborative process with structure and guidelines. The idea of selection criteria demonstrated in Cremin and Oliver (2017) enlightened me to the kinds of structure researchers employ to ensure their review discusses the research that is actually relevant to their question. As a novice, I think there is a tendency to want to cast a wide net, but reading how this review followed 'systematic procedures' to try and maintain focus on specific research questions make me think how we sometimes need to take time to refine question before searching. While not all reviews use the same procedures and reviews can have different approaches/focuses (Denney&Tewksbury, 2013) there seems to be a general protocol that changes slightly depending on research aims”(Solano, 2019, para 1)” in this post it is clear how enlightening it was for me to see there are specific steps and shows how I was holding onto misconception that qualitative research was free from rules.

In contrast to the amount of procedure I highlight in my response to literature reviews, I found the texts about honing in on a theoretical framework less step by step. Looking back at my notes I find Collins and Stockton (2018) guided my understanding the most by discussing how it is a process of finding a lens through which to view the literature and data, but that lens does not nessicarily have to come from exisiting theories. Here I note that there are guidlines to theories rather than clear steps and that one must be cautious not to rely on something that is “ready made”(Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

Reading about each of these pieces and how the conceptual framework connect them helped me start to see how qualitative reserach stands alone, however when I look back at my posts I see I did not make the realization that what truly characterizes quaitative reserach until looking at the work of Duckworth (2007) on Grit that Ravitch and Riggan (2017) use as an examplar of conceptual frameworks. I discuss in my posts how I do not fully agree with the concept of grit, but could not deny that the work of Duckworth (2007) communicated a clear, deep, and hollistic argument for the concept which taught me the importance of framework. I state in week five, “despite my personal beliefs, I clearly understood the argument because of the conceptual framework which led me to see how conceptual frameworks make complete and clear arguments, they do not impose or imply 'proof.' It does not seem to matter whether one is convinced, rather that you understand the 'relationship between known and unknown' (Riggans & Ravitch, 2017, p. 54)”(Solano, 2019, para 1). Here I also bring up the importance of teaching rather than proving “Polit and Tatano Beck (2004) emphasize, the framework should make findings clear and useful to the reader (as cited in Green, 2014), which made me think of the conceptual framework as not only an argument but also a teaching tool.” (Solano, 2019, para 1).In this post I communicate new understandings about qualitative structure and goals of qualitative genre separately. Now, upon reflction, I realize that conceptual framework serves as structure for qualitative reserach and the goal of that structure is to educate. I now view the way this framework is built in conjunction with how it is used to educate as what makes qualitative research its own unique genre that does not need to be defined against quantitative.

**Positionality**

While this insight about qualitative research standing alone continued to build throughout the course and was present in my mind each week, when we took on the topic of positionality my mind shifted focus to issues of power. Prior to the course I considered myself aware of unjust power structures and how research could manipulate findings and misrepresent participants. However, it became clear early on that I did not fully understand how much critical thinking was required when looking at reserach and how high the stakes can be when we passively take in research as inherently true just because it was published. I focused early on an excerpt from Rossman and Rallis (2017) that brings up philosopher Hannah Arendt and how she found lack of question could enable totalitarianism. While it is an extreme example it stood out to me and made me admit I was someone who has become comfortable with my thinking and forgotten the "stakes can be quite high" when we fail to focus, polish, and evolve our critical lenses.(Solano, week 2, para 1).

What was missing at this point was the connection between this and stating your position. When we read Roegman (2018) my eyes opened to what she states about most academic research coming from a white perspective, yet this is never overtly stated. As a result, we take in this singular perspective as objectively true. I realized that omitting a statement of positionality denies the presense of any subjectivties and maintains a hegemonic approach to research. I began to look deeper into research and look for the authors perpsective and think about how that affects every choice they make in the research process. With this more critical and informed lense I took the examining qualitative reserach essay as an opportunity to look for positionality and found that both articles I researched did not include their perspective and I found “the absence of research position left a void in my understanding. While I understood the topic and the steps they took, I have little information on why they took those steps” (Solano, 2019). I see that knowledge about the “why” is not just nice to have, but nessecary to determine the ethics of the research. The lack of positionality made it even more clear that you can not understand or trust the research fully without understanding the author.

After this first analysis of qualitative research paper it was very clear positionality was crucial, but it was not until experiencing research that omitted postion and thinking back to when we engaged in writing our own for community of practice activity that I fully made the connection between position and power. When I wrote my position I recognized the amount of vulnerability that writing your positionality requires. I had to dig deep into my history and identity and figure out how to communicate it in an open and honest way. I found myself hesitant to press submit not because I was nervous about potential typos, but because I was nervous about exposing myself and how my position might be interpreted by others. This apprehension made me grasp how humanizing the positionality statement is and how removing it causes a disconnect between the researcher and the participants and readers. The amount I learned about myself from writing the position statement and the insights I gained about my fellow classmates made it clear how critical this position piece is to ensure that we do not make our work appear omniscient and objective and instead we communicate that our research questions, methods, and findings are a product of our prespective that we should be open and honest about so that readers can see the topic through our lens while also making their own interpretations and decsions.

**Trustworthiness**

Issues of power remained very prominant in my thinking and remain as my biggest concern as a researcher, but when we read about how to ensure trustworthiness the theme of qualittive reserach having its own unique sturcture and procedures surfaced and connected to my concerns about power because I began to examen how the unique structure and techniques of qualititive research could either uphold or dismantle power structures in academia.

This was particularly apparent when reading about the standards to assess validity of qualitative research. Rossman and Rallis(2017) served as the most helpful guide to understand what makes a study trustyworthy. In my initial discussion post I highlight their statement that "these standards are applied through rigorous reasoning-through a process that is meticulous, conscientious, careful, diligent, attentive, scrupulous, exact, precise, accurate, thorough, sensitive, and particular (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p.70)." This was the most salient quote for me because it helped me realize that even though there are myriad of approaches to qualitative research, it does not mean anything will be accepted and used. As I state in week three, “until reading this section, I understood that qualitative research was not a free for all and had its own standards and methods of ensuring rigor, but wasn't sure what they were and what the basis for them was” (Solano, 2019, para 2). I then discuss the concrete examples of how to ensure valid and trustworthy research Rossman and Rallis (2017) offer such as triangulation, stating position, employing multiple methods, and providing thick description. Learning about each of these things changed my thinking from equating trustworthy with true to thinking of it more as honest and complete. It became clear the structure of qualitative research is not just about what you do and in which order, but how you do it.

**Developing Research Questions**

Early on in the course I highlighted the statement by Rossman and Rallis (2017) that qualitative reserach is about learning, but it was not until the course focusd on research questions that the theme of qualitive reseraching being more about learning and teaching than testing and proving emerged. When we began to shift from learning about how qualitative reserach is built and started thinking about how we would conduct research of our own I had to think a lot deeper about what makes a good question. In discussion posts on this topic I focused on the question Ravitch and Riggan (2017) urge researchers to think about when formulating a question  "What does your audience already know and care about?" (p.85). This paired with the "should you do it?" idea Rossman and Rallis (2017) discuss led me to understand that creating a research question is complex and simple at the same time. The process of narrowing down a topic and analyzing what has been said about it and determining what remains to be said is complex and as I describe in my post ‘daunting’ because there are so many possibilities, but as I also point out there are grounding questions that can make the process of deciding if a question is useful simple. “Among all the considerations for what makes good research I feel the "should it happen" piece is the most crucial. It can't just matter to me, it has to be relevant and useful to the participants and audience.” Looking back on this statement I see it is another way to point out that the ultimate purpose of the research should be to learn and teach. If we ask questions based on what we want to prove or what we think will be published we risk manipulating data to serve the purpose of proving an initial idea correct instead of holistically and profoundly communicating what we discover.

This simultaneous complexity and simplicity I found when reading about the process of formulating a research question was reinforced when I began to engage with the community of practice activity in which we imagined how we would come up with a question and design a study. It was immediately clear what topics and questions mattered most to me and I could look at my questions and confidently answer the questions will I learn from this? And does this matter to me? with a yes, but the complexity came in and still remains when I began to ask myself it matters to my audience, if it will shed light on something new, and if it is too broad or too narrow. As I bring up in my final reflection post on the course, I am still wresting with these questions and believe re-visiting the course texts and continuing to practice and seek feedback will allow me to take what I learned about what makes a valid question and put it into practice in my own research remembering that I can ground my thinking in the idea that when we embark on research we set out to learn.

**Collecting and Analyzing Data**

As we moved on to parts of the reserach process I considred more ‘practical’ I thought my mind would swiftly shift from developing conceptual understandings to building concrete skills, but I found the opposite. In learning about what steps researchers can take to collect and analyze data multiple conceptual understandings surfaced equally and made it clear that even though the collecting and analyzing data element of reserach requires organization, it is not isolated from the deep thinking that goes into building a conceptual framework. During the readings and activities on this topic the themes about reseraching to learn and issues of power came out equally and guided my understanding. The issue of power was central to my understanding of collecting data while the focus on learning characterized my perception of data analysis.

 After reading chapter six in Rossman and Rallis (2017) the work of Fine (2003) that Ravitch and Riggan(2017) present in chapter five it was clear that the data collections technqiues you use and how you use them could perpetuate unjust power or work to alleviate it. In my responses I focus on how I was nervous about gaining trust from participants and not engaging in any practice that would oversimplify and/or misrepresent them and how the readings, especially the work of Fine (2003), helped me see how researchers can provide antidotes to the history of power imbalances that exist in academic reserach. I note in week ten “it was not a surprise that it is difficult and deeply important to consider how you will enter into and become a part of the world of your participants. Finding a way to engage with participants in a reciprocal way has been something at the forefront of my mind before deciding to enter this program and decide if academic research was even something I wanted to do. This chapter gave me some clarity as to how to approach this issue and reaffirmed its importance” (Solano, 2019, para 1). I then go on to state how the work of Fine (2013) and other researchers who are employing new techniques to form trusting relationships gave me solace and confidence that ethical methods exist despite some lingering concerns and fears I will not do justice to the group of people I seek to understand.

 these ideas were further explored when I began to write the second qualitative analysis paper in which we described how we would approach a research question. The part I found that gave me the most pause was how to collect data. I remained stuck for a long time thinking about what techniques I was using, were they adequate? Were they fair? What was the level of reciprocity? Was I doing as Fine (2003)says and “interrupting broad social trends that serve to marginalize the voices of research particpants” (Fine, 2003 as cited in Ravitch&Riggan, 2017). Thess are questions I did not fully answer and am realzing are not the kinds of questions one can confirm at the end of a semester, rather I think they are ongoing and should be asked by both novice and expert researchers.

 After completing this paper I was eager to read more about data analysis. Until reading chapters ten and eleven of Rossman and Rallis (2017) I saw analysis as the part where you look for the ‘answer,’ but then grasped the idea that it is more about interpreting and formulating an understanding that you can communicate. I admit in my post in week thirteen ” I definitely was not aware of all the different ways you could approach analysis and how important it is to balance a structured plan with flexible thinking. Meaning, we need an intentional strategy, but also must open to what unforeseen things might occur in the research process” (Solano, 2019, para 1).

This initial discovery from the readings was reinforced when we attempted analysis of research data. During this activity and the discussions that followed it, I saw all the concepts we read about in action. I could not ‘rely on memory’ as Rossman and Rallis (2017) point out, I had to read and re-read the notes multiple times to draw conclusion and form codes. Additionally, I could not focus on the data as a whole attempting to take it in like a ‘human camera’ I had to focus in on patterns, identify codes, and then construct themes. Through engaging in this process the interpretive nature of data analysis became extremely evident which further contributed to my understanding that it is important to not communicate findings as if we are all knowing which contributes to idea that the author holds the power to say what is right and wrong. Rather we must use the guidelines and procedures of qualitative research to communicate what we focused on, why we focused on it, and communicate potential implications.

**How to present a research project**

After garnering a deeper understanding of qualitative research and all its layers and factors I felt hesitant I was ready to even think about how to present research when I still have so much to learn about how to conduct it. However, as I began to read I felt all three themes that had been developing throughout the course integrate and help me study this phase of the research process not as ‘the end’ but as another part of the process that requires thinking about how one’s research fits in with the genre of qualitative research, how it plays into or works against unequal power structures, and how authentically and fully it communicates learning rather than attempting to present insights as facts. As I read Mitchell and Clark (2018) my thinking focused on how power structure can control the way we present our findings. As they state, academic writing often feels void of creativity and passion because authors fear rejection from “invisible gatekeepers” and what results is a presentation that does not do justice to the human and complex subject matter the research explores. I thought back to countless articles I have read during my academic career that were about fascinating topics, but presented in such a disengaging way. I started to ask myself how can you avoid this, but still have a place within the academic genre? I do not have a singular answer to this question, but Rossman and Rallis(2017) initiated the process of answering it and visualizing how I might present my future research. The grounding principles they offer that work must be engaging and convincing helped me think about how to avoid the disengaging work Mitchell and Clark (2018) speak against, but also demonstrate knowledge of what makes ethical research and present work that not only fits within the genre, but improves the genre by sharing information in a way that truly educates the reader and offers a variety of implications and uses.

**Conclusions**

 As I complete this course I see my learning did not follow a linear trajectory, going from knowing nothing to progressively more knowledgable, rather I feel my thinking and understanding evolved and changed throughout the course and now as I look back I find I am walking away with both new insights and questions. I started with a surface understanding of qualitative research and as I made my way through the course I come back to that initial definiton with same core motivations for research, but much deeper and more critical undersanding of what qualitative reaserach is, how it can be used, and the responsability researchers have to fully represent particpants and communicate their own perspectives and motives. I have let go of the idea that I should walk away knowing how to complete a research project and now seek to focus more on understanding what qualitative research is and trust that having a deep and holistic understanding of this research genre will lead to clarity in how to engage in the process.

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