



Doing Qualitative Research

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JOHN CRESWELL: Well, let me talk a little bit about just doing qualitative research. [John Creswell, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Nebraska Lincoln] And I'm going to start with what I've observed over the years of kind of the personal characteristics of people that make good qualitative researchers. I actually put this into a talent test

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: for one of my classes. And I administered it the first night. And I found out that was not a good idea, because people started dropping out the class. They felt they may not have the talent. But I think there's some characteristics of a talented qualitative researcher-- some personal ways of thinking about things.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: For example, I think qualitative researchers are people that look for the big picture. And my example is, if you're standing at the entrance of the Rocky Mountain National Park and you ask them, what do they see, the qualitative researchers are going to talk about the panoramic view, the entire picture.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: And the nonqualitative researchers are going to go to the individual trees. So I think qualitative researchers are big-picture people. And they also would probably draw a picture of this scene that they see. I think qualitative people are very visual people,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: so that, in my books, I tend to include a lot of visuals for the qualitative people. I think qualitative people see the detail that's going on in life. They can construct how people talk about something in great detail so that you're almost placed

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: right in the setting. There's even a qualitative word for this. It's called "verisimilitude." And that is to make things absolutely real. So when you read a good qualitative study, it's as if you're right there in the room. You know, if it's a nursing home and you're in the dining room of a nursing home,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: it's just as if you're right there and you can see the people seated around. The portrait is so well detailed out that you're transported to this new place. Qualitative researchers like to write. And they've done a lot of writing.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: So I often ask my students in the first class, how many of you keep a personal journal for your writing? How many of you have joined a poetry group? What is the latest nonfiction book that you've read, or fiction book?

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: Qualitative researchers like to do a lot of writing and can describe situations in writing quite easily. Qualitative researchers also, I think, like making connections. In fact, there was a well-known psychologist a few years ago

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: that wrote a study looking at the relationship between people that were good qualitative researchers and how they tested on a test of the Miller's analogy test, which is where you start matching items up with lists. And the good qualitative people could do that quite easily. I think they start looking for interconnections quite easily.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: That's a sign of good qualitative researcher. I think another sign of a good qualitative researcher would be a person that allows things to emerge and unfold in research.

You know, none of this starting with hypotheses or a question and never varying from it, but starting with a question

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: and then allowing it to change once they start learning from people. That's good qualitative research. So these are some of the kind of personal characteristics that I've seen over the years. And then some people have written about,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: what is qualitative research? What is qualitative research? Qualitative research, I think, starts with wanting to listen to the views of the people that you're talking to. Setting aside the literature, setting aside your theories, setting aside what you expect to find,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: and just listening to how people are talking about things. It's the participant view. Qualitative researchers also like the study to unfold in terms of emerging questions, emerging data collection. You might start out with one question and, once you get out in the field,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: find that it doesn't work to answer what you want to learn. So you change the question. You might even change the people that you talk to. That's qualitative research. So the question is very open-ended. What does it mean to participate in a school

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: in qualitative course? What does it mean? Very open-ended. And you allow the participants to give responses back to that. Another thing about qualitative research is you go out to the setting to gather your data. You know? It's not this laboratory where you bring people in.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: It's not sending out a survey instrument 100 miles away that people would fill out. No, you go to where the problem is occurring, to talk to people. We call that "going to the setting" or the "context." So you'll go out into homes. You go out to places people work. Wherever they're experiencing this problem

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: that you're looking at. That's good qualitative research. Another thing is, when you have this information from your-- let's say you do some interviews with people-- how do you go about analyzing that qualitatively? Well, in qualitative research what you do is you go from the ground up-- an inductive method

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: of data analysis. So you take your-- you know, you do an interview. You've got a transcript that was typed up after the interview, from the audiotaped interview. And you've got this transcript. So you have the raw data of the transcript. And then what you do is you start building broader and broader and broader

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: categories of information. Terms we use in qualitative research would be you "code" the data. And then you can aggregate the codes into themes, and then maybe the themes into larger dimensions. You see how I'm just kind of building up? Inductive reasoning, inductive logic, in data analysis.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: Another thing about qualitative research-- it's really quite fascinating-- is the researcher is present in the written report that comes together. In other words, you talk about yourself and your experiences. You talk about your background and how that might have shaped the

interpretation that you made. So they call qualitative research very "interpretive."

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: Well, the researcher is looking at this transcript, shall we say, and making some interpretation of what they see. And they talk about how their background shapes what they see in that transcript and how it maybe informs their interpretation. So I'm a white male, and I'm going

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: to bring maybe a male's perspective to making an interpretation of what's in this transcript. There's a term for this in qualitative research. It's called "reflexivity"-- being reflexive. It's a very important element of doing good qualitative research. And then one final thing about qualitative

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: is, how do you write up the final report? You know, traditional research is we have an introduction, we have a literature review, we have a methods, we have the results, we have the discussion. Well, that format doesn't always hold true in qualitative research.

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: We may start with the personal experiences of the researcher. I worked on a project looking at, how do people view transplants in their life? And it starts by the personal experiences of the doctor working with the patient about transplants. The title of that piece is called

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: "Waiting for a Transplant." So the format doesn't follow the traditional. It could be more of a literary storytelling, where you're actually starting with the beginning of the story and moving through the middle and on to the end, towards the end of the story. So we have what we call a "flexible" writing structure,

JOHN CRESWELL [continued]: in qualitative research, that is somewhat difficult to see at first and to think about, because people are so used to that formal structure. But it's there in qualitative research.