

An Examination of Qualitative Empirical Studies at the AHRD from 1999-2003: Method, Rationale for Method, Data Collection, Sampling Strategies, and Integrity Measures

Tonette S. Rocco, Florida International University, USA

Howard McCarley, Club Med, USA

Maria S. Plakhotnik, Judith Bernier, Silvana Ianinska, Cecilia Gonzalez

Florida International University, USA

Abstract: The paper examines the nature of qualitative empirical studies published in the AHRD proceedings from 1999-2003 and discusses findings on method, rationale for method, data collection, sampling strategies, and integrity measures.

Donovan and Marsick (2000) documented three trends in human resource development (HRD) research: (a) HRD has made strong inroads as an area of professional practice, (b) the field continues to use qualitative and quantitative tools relatively equally, and (c) the number of articles published in the field increased by 50% from 1997 to 1998. The second point that qualitative and quantitative tools are used relatively equally is contradictory to personal experience (Rocco, 2003). Perceptions within the field of HRD appear to be that (a) qualitative research is not published because qualitative methods are not honored by the editors, reviewers, or the field and (b) qualitative research lacks rigor and is therefore not of publishable quality. To address this contradiction, we conducted this study to examine the nature of qualitative empirical studies in the field of HRD over the past five years by searching Academy of Human Resource Development proceedings from 1999-2003.

Summary of Research on Research

As a field that has grown over the past 20 years, research on research becomes more important as a gauge of our future (Williams, Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2002). Four approaches have been taken to estimate HRD's progress as a field through research on research: Comparison to established fields (Williams, 2001), faculty productivity through article publication (Williams et al., 2002), field productivity through publication outlets (Dooley, 2002; Sleezer, Sleezer, & Pace, 1996), and analysis of types and tools of empirical research (Arnold, 1996; van Hoof & Mulder, 1997; Hardy, 1999; Hixon & McClernon, 1999).

Williams (2001) conducted a review of research methods to determine if the field of HRD was following a developmental pattern similar to management science by comparing articles published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* from 1995 to 1999 and in the *Academy of Management Journal* from 1975 to 1979. Articles were searched for "every mentioned statistical and research methodology" (Williams, 2001, p. 2). Even though she clearly states an interest in statistical methods only, her analysis notes the use of qualitative methods but does not explore or honor qualitative methods as important to building the field.

Arnold (1996) explored the state of research by analyzing AHRD conference papers for 1994 and 1995 using four types of research: "library research/speculative, descriptive case study or field study, field or laboratory experiment, [and] theoretical model or instrument construction" (p. 818). Field studies were further broken down "into the type of tools" used, quantitative, and qualitative. Forty-one papers used quantitative methods and 16 papers used qualitative methods, four of which did not specify method and the remaining papers used 10 different methods.

van Hoof and Mulder (1997) analyzed the 1996 AHRD proceedings by dividing them into four content categories and seven research characteristics. Research methods are data collection tools such as questionnaire or interview while data format included quantitative, qualitative and quantitative, and qualitative. van Hoof and Mulder state that 57.7% of the studies used only qualitative data. This is inconsistent with their statements about 31.9% of papers gathering only narrative data “without any quantitative analysis” (p. 16) while 28.5% “quantify their qualitative data by rating them” (p. 16). The definitions of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies used by van Hoof and Mulder are not consistent with definitions accepted by methodologists in qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) or mixed methods fields (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Hixon and McClernon (1999) followed but did not replicate the Sleezer et al. (1996) search strategy, finding 66 articles in 23 journals published in 1997. The articles were classified by subject, research method, research participants and publication venue. Research method was divided into four types of research and “two tools (i.e., qualitative and quantitative)” (p. 899) and duplicated Arnold’s (1996) classification scheme. All of the articles and papers were placed in two categories, qualitative or quantitative, and ignored the category of mixed methods. Twenty-one of the sixty-six articles relied on qualitative tools. The 45 quantitative articles were broken down by method of analysis but not the qualitative articles.

What has been lacking in these studies of research in HRD is a systematic analysis of mixed methods and qualitative empirical studies. The perception of qualitative research not being honored is evident by the uneven treatment given to qualitative studies, if they are included in the data at all in these studies on research.

Research Design

First, titles, abstracts, and methods sections were scanned to determine the number of qualitative empirical studies. Of 695 total papers, 173 (less than 25%) were considered qualitative studies. During the data collection and analysis, this number was further reduced to 151. During the two-step data collection phase, papers were read more thoroughly to find the data to input into the ACCESS database, read again by the second researcher checking the data, and again by a third researcher to analyze specific categories. The research group (5 students and a faculty member) met regularly to determine categories, to ensure consistency in search strategies and use of the database, and to discuss other issues as they occurred. Data was collected in these categories: 1) method, 2) rationale for method, 3) research question, 4) participants, 5) sample, 6) data collection, 7) data analysis, 8) data management, 9) integrity measures, and 10) inquiry literature used. Patton (2002) served as our baseline for category definitions and for decisions of what to include in a category.

The data was analyzed using content analysis procedures where we attempted “to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Two questions were used as a guide: To what extent does Patton’s taxonomy of qualitative research methods correspond to methods reported by HR practitioners and researchers? How is qualitative research performed and reported by HR practitioners and researchers today? When the data collected did not fit into Patton’s taxonomies, themes that emerged from the data were used. Due to space limitations for conference submissions findings from only five categories will be discussed.

Results

This section summarizes themes that emerged during the analysis of 151 papers in the categories of (a) method, (b) rationale for method, (c) data collection, (d) sample, and (e) integrity measures.

Method

First, 37 papers (27.2%) explicitly discuss the chosen research method in terms of its theoretical perspective, following Patton's (2002) taxonomy of 16 theoretical perspectives and linking each method to its respective disciplinary roots. All but four papers use the language of Patton's theoretical perspective taxonomy. The authors of these four papers identify their perspective as "interpretivism" which Patton (p. 115) links to the hermeneutics theoretical perspective. Phenomenology and ethnography were the most common perspectives employed. Second, just over half (51%) of the papers address method in terms of the design of the research project (as a tool or technique) rather than one of philosophical concept or theoretical perspective. Case study is the most common method category for the "technicians" (29.1%). While a case can be made for discussing method in terms of overall research design, 23 of these "technician" papers misuse the word method to address solely the data collection technique employed. Third, a smaller number of the papers (15.9%) address method in purely generic terms as "qualitative". While this may serve to clarify the research performed was not quantitative, such simplistic efforts damage the credibility of that author's findings. Even less credible were the nine papers that present qualitative research without addressing method at all.

Rationale for Selection of Method

Half of the papers specifically address the rationale behind the choice of method. Of these papers, two large categories emerged to describe the data. First, one third of the authors (36.4%) selected method for pragmatic reasons. These authors decided upon the research questions and then chose the method that seemed most appropriate to the problem at hand. Patton (2002) suggests that pragmatic choice of method, based on the questions to be answered, is a valid approach. Approximately three quarters of the 55 "pragmatist" papers directly state that the method was chosen in this fashion, with the remainder of the pragmatist papers making less explicit arguments for the appropriateness of the method to the problem. Second, in almost a quarter (22.5%) of the papers, method reflects the researchers' paradigm. The method was predetermined and influenced the choice of research problems and questions. Patton supports this approach and discusses the fundamental paradigm-questions that guide such researchers. This group appears to be smaller than the pragmatists but more pronounced in their views. Eighty-two percent of the "paradigm" papers address the authors' point of view explicitly and discuss the effect this has on their reported research.

Data Collection

Qualitative research involves "three kinds of data collection" (Patton, 2002, p. 4): interviews, observations, and documents. Only 150 papers specified the kinds of data collected. Interviews were used most often (92.5%). Patton (2002) identifies three "approaches" to (p. 342), "variations" (p. 341), or "strategies" (p. 348) of open-ended interviews: informal conversational interviews, a general guide approach, and structured interviews. Almost a third of the papers (29.5%) used Patton's classification. Fifty-five studies (39.5%) identified the approach as semi-structured interviews, but exact number of studies utilizing this approach is unclear due to the variety of terms used. For example, 40 studies used the term semi-structured interviews, four of them were also in-depth, and eight used a guide, a protocol, or a schedule. Some authors (13%) used other terminology (e.g., oral interview, non-participant interview) while a large portion (18%) did not identify the approach to interviews. Fifty-eight papers (41.4%) used documents and six utilized documents as the only source of data. Forty-five studies (29.7%) used observations to collect data, and one used observations as the only source of data. Patton (2002) points to a number of terms used for observations in the literature. Eight studies

used the term participant observation, while thirty others used the generic term observations or other descriptions.

Sampling Strategies

Forty-five papers (30%) explicitly stated a sampling strategy using Patton's classification of 16 sampling strategies. The three most popular sampling strategies used were: criterion sampling, convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Twenty-one papers (13%) were classified as having implicit sampling strategies since they did not identify any of Patton's 16 sampling strategies. Some authors merely stated that the participants were from a known pool of contacts (i.e. convenience sampling) or chosen on the basis of leadership or membership (i.e. criterion sampling). These papers mentioned some type of sampling strategy but provided no rationale for its selection. Third, thirty-four papers (22.5%) addressed sampling in purely generic terms as "purposeful". Since all sampling in qualitative research is conducted with purposeful intentions (Creswell, 2003), it leaves the reader with questions whether "purposeful" refers to the selection criteria or to the general intent of the study. Finally, fifty-one papers (33%) did not state a sampling strategy, though sampling was evident due to detailed descriptions of the units of analysis (e.g., participants' race and gender). The detailed descriptions of participants served as a substitution for the sampling strategy.

Integrity Measures

Integrity was not addressed in 51 papers (33%), possibly due to the space limitations of conference papers. A real dilemma for authors preparing eight page conference papers is what to include and to leave out. Another possibility exists that no integrity measures were used during the research process. Second, seven papers addressed integrity without explicitly stating it or discerning Patton's (2002) strategies (e.g., "the findings were shared with all participants" [Bierema, 1999, p. 778]). Third, ninety-three papers (62%) used and described integrity measure. Authors most frequently use review by inquiry participants (38.7%), triangulation with multiple analysts (32.2%), and triangulation of data sources (30.1%). Generating and assessing rival conclusions was used in twelve papers (12.9%) and expert audit review in seven papers (7.5%). Design check, negative and discrepant cases, reflexive triangulation/audience review, and theory triangulation are the least used strategies for insuring integrity.

Discussion and Implications

Many researchers in the field seem to be poorly educated regarding qualitative method; which contributes to the common perception of qualitative research as undisciplined, lacking rigor, or "soft." More interesting is the apparent division between the "theoreticians" who look to the conceptual roots of qualitative inquiry, and the "technicians" who discuss method in the terms a mechanic or scientist might use for his equipment. The dominance of "technicians" may be attributed to the desire of researchers for legitimacy.

The difference between the pragmatists and the paradigm-driven researchers has a certain "chicken and egg" quality. Can we truly be objective as researchers? The answer to the question determines where we stand as researchers in relation to our work. The voice of the researcher is an essential part of qualitative work. When it is addressed in the form of the researcher's rationale for the selection of method, the findings can be put into an applicable context for practitioners or other researchers.

The rare use of documents and observations raises concerns; their role as secondary or supplementary to interviews devalues them as rich information sources. Experts in qualitative methods should re-examine the role and value of documents and observations in HRD research. Even Patton (2002) while clearly identifying three sources of data, devotes an entire chapter for a

lengthy discussion of interviews, but discusses documents in a short sub-section, combining it with observation techniques and providing little practical guidance for researchers. The lack of clarity in defining terms related to data collection represents another serious problem. Is this a consequence of poor understanding and description of the data collection process and kinds of data? Does the variety of terminology reflect the details of different approaches to data collection? Should efforts be made to reach consistency in terminology?

In regards to sampling, researchers either choose not to explain the purpose of their sample strategy, may be unfamiliar with the varying degrees and depth of sampling strategies, or seem to regard “purposeful sampling” as a sampling technique for inquiry but disregard its many strategies for capturing rich information. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research allows looking at a phenomenon holistically with many different lenses and strategies. This means doing more than generically labeling data, techniques or strategies. HRD researchers are expected to be selective in their use of the many different kinds of sampling strategies and explicitly state their rationales and logic for their selection.

Qualitative researchers generally use a combination of strategies to insure the accuracy and rigor of their interpretations. Authors address integrity “to validate their findings” (Cseh & Short, 2000, p.742), “to contribute to the reliability and credibility of the data” (Lewis & Geroy, 2002, p. 443), or “to maximize the credibility and trustworthiness of both the research process and its outcomes” (Callahan, 2000, p. 672). Researchers who took integrity into account helped our team determine the coherence of their research and enhanced the adequacy of their analysis. It is discouraging integrity was not addressed in one third of the papers. HRD researchers who chose to use qualitative methods need to acknowledge the importance of employing strategies that enhance integrity and rigor if their work is to be judged credible, reasonable, and trustworthy.

Hopefully, this study will encourage qualitative researchers to provide more detail on the research design. This will enhance the specific study and continue to raise the bar on quality of qualitative research designs. Further research should be conducted on qualitative research in HRD journals and on preparation of qualitative researchers.

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