

## Improving the Standard Approaches to Qualitative Education Research

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Daniel Narey has identified two important issues. At a theoretical level, qualitative researchers need to understand what the warrants should be for making claims that go beyond description, what Narey calls “interpretive claims.” At a practical level, they need to have a model for the practice of research that will lead them to having such warrants. To address these issues, he describes some ways in which he believes that current standard approaches to qualitative research go wrong in theory and practice. He synthesizes the work of scholars who make similar points, then points out ways in which these critiques should themselves be critiqued. He concludes the essay by sketching how Toulmin’s analyses of arguments point the way toward an analytic-pragmatist resolution of the issues for qualitative education research. In my response, I extract what I see as central points in Narey’s initial critique and solution, then say that, although I think some qualitative research has the flaws Narey describes, that may not be true of “standard approaches,” as represented by texts used in teaching qualitative methods.

Narey states that the “standard approaches to *qualitative* research in education and related fields” have several, closely related mistakes: using the logic or methods of “analytic induction” to search for preexisting patterns, treating the people studied as only “sources of data,” and seeing research as a sequential process in which analysis does not begin until data collection is complete.

“Analytic induction” is an approach to qualitative research in which the investigator systematically works through interview responses or notes from field observations, establishing codes, then carefully attaching those codes to particular responses or events, perhaps cycling through the data several times, with the aim of discovering patterns that are present. That approach resembles what researchers sometimes call the “constant comparative method.”<sup>1</sup> Narey’s critique is that analytic induction assumes that there is some single existing pattern to be discovered, rather than acknowledging the active role that the researcher plays in constructing an interpretation.

The problem with analytic induction’s assumption of preexisting patterns is that it represents an outdated dualistic Cartesian epistemology in which the researcher is an independent thinker but the people being studied are seen only as objects. It is now widely accepted among both social scientists and philosophers that both the researcher and those studied are active constructors of meanings and interpretations. Analytic induction is wrong to assume that people’s words and deeds follow static patterns that exist independent of both researcher and those being studied.

Narey suggests that standard approaches to qualitative research start from these flawed epistemological and ontological assumptions, then adopt mechanistic,

formalistic, practical methods of inquiry, which may seem to provide warrants for qualitative research, but do so at the cost of searching for something that does not exist — a preexisting pattern of human behavior. Qualitative researchers do need some way to demonstrate the warrants for their conclusions, but there is no point in having warrants for specious conclusions.

The question, says Narey, is how qualitative research can move away from mechanical processes of developing and using codes, while still providing enough structure to undergird warrants for claims that will be widely acknowledged as adequate. Narey suggests that both hermeneutic approaches from the study of texts and hypothetico-deductive approaches give the investigator a more active role than in analytic induction, using concepts and theories as lenses for interpreting data, using and revising patterns for the investigator.

Narey finds even these approaches problematic because they treat the data as objectively given. He would rather say that something is treated as data if members of the audience for the research accept it as credible. Narey is once more pressing the idea that all aspects of qualitative research are imbued with constructions of the investigators and probably also of those being studied. All aspects of the construction of knowledge involve active construction.

As a step toward processes of qualitative research that represent the social construction of both data and interpretation, Narey proposes making use of Stephen Toulmin's scheme for the analysis of arguments<sup>2</sup> as a way of understanding what it means for claims from qualitative research to be warranted. The central idea is that warrants come from the ways in which researchers themselves explicate the connections among data, claims, warrants, and backing. The key point Narey wishes to make is that qualitative researchers should be conscious that all components of an argument involve active construction by the research community, that none of them are objectively given. The consequence is that offering a warrant for a claim is a matter of drawing on a variety of items (data, interpretations, backing, and the like), asserting that the community accepts these. The community may then acknowledge acceptance or dispute some items, leading to a conversation within the community that either moves toward consensus or reveals divides that require subsequent discussion.

Surely “analytic induction” as described by Narey is out of touch with contemporary views in philosophy of science and social psychology. The view that objective data are given and that any form of science is a formalized process of induction to discover a set of preexisting patterns has been discredited. The hope for finding a formal process for discovering object truths is understandable, but unattainable.<sup>3</sup>

My question about Narey's critique, however, is whether the standard practices of qualitative research are guilty of holding these untenable positions. His paper refers to such practices, but does not cite particular examples to illustrate the problems.

I offer some examples from works written about qualitative research, which indicate that recommended practice, at least, does not fall prey to the untenable views about the givenness of data and interpretation. First, a quote from one of the most widely cited chapters about qualitative research on teaching, Frederick Erick-

son's chapter in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, "One can argue that there are no pure inductions. We always bring to experience frames of interpretation, or schemata. From this point of view the task of fieldwork is to become more and more reflectively aware of the frames of interpretation of those we observe, and of our own culturally learned frames of interpretation we brought with us to the setting."<sup>4</sup> Erickson is explicitly recommending against an inductive approach and encouraging researchers to be aware of the frames they bring to their studies.

My second example is the conclusion of a recent article by John Creswell and Dana Miller.<sup>5</sup> Creswell is the author of a widely used text on qualitative methods.<sup>6</sup> The article discusses a variety of approaches to gauging the validity of a report of qualitative research, a topic similar to gauging whether inferences are warranted. They write, "What is most important is that the credibility of the account be conveyed in a qualitative study. We suggest that the use of validity procedures requires thinking beyond specific procedures — to acknowledge the lens being employed in a study and the paradigm assumptions of the researchers."<sup>7</sup> Creswell and Miller seem to be echoing Narey's point that it is credibility that is primal, not following a particular formal procedure. They explicitly recognize that the active constructions of the researchers — lenses and paradigm assumptions — are more important than particular procedures.

I don't mean to deny that some students may come out of qualitative research methods classes thinking that their task is to induce patterns by following established procedures. And it may even be that some qualitative methods instructors reinforce such views, intentionally or unintentionally. That would parallel the complaints that many educators have about the tendency for many subjects to be learned (and perhaps taught) as meaningless algorithms and procedures, rather than as richly complex domains.

But if many of the prime texts for qualitative researchers are not guilty of such epistemological and methodological sins, should we be criticizing the "standard methods" of qualitative research, or should we be trying to work on the obstacles that prevent many students from learning these standard methods? Narey reminds us of the ways in which empirical researchers might go wrong, but to promote improvements in qualitative research, an important next step will be to connect the theoretical analysis to widely used texts for qualitative research methods, promoting conversations that will align those texts with the philosophical analysis and lead to improvements in the standard methods.

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1. Barney G. Glaser, and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

2. Stephen E. Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

3. Robert E. Floden, "Empirical Research Without Certainty," *Educational Theory* 59, no. 4 (2009): 485–98.

4. Frederick Erickson, "Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching," in *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, 3rd ed., ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 119–161, 140.

5. John W. Creswell and Dana L. Miller, "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," *Theory into Practice* 39, no. 3 (2000): 124–30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1477543>.

6. John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013).
7. Creswell and Miller, "Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry," 129.