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# The Quilting Bee: A Research Metaphor

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## The Quilting Bee: A Research Metaphor

### **Abstract**

This paper uses the art of quilting as a metaphor for the research process. Two very different stories are revealed by Amish women at a quilting bee as they explore their purposes, thoughts, and experiences in producing their first quilts. The metaphor is used to contrast the goals, involvement of the researcher, and descriptions utilized by qualitative and quantitative researchers. The tales of these Amish women both contribute to an understanding of the art of quilting just as both qualitative and quantitative researchers have contributions to make to the field of education.

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# **The Quilting Bee: A Research Metaphor**

by  
**Rhoda C. Sommers<sup>±</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This paper uses the art of quilting as a metaphor for the research process. Two very different stories are revealed by Amish women at a quilting bee as they explore their purposes, thoughts, and experiences in producing their first quilts. The metaphor is used to contrast the goals, involvement of the researcher, and descriptions utilized by qualitative and quantitative researchers. The tales of these Amish women both contribute to an understanding of the art of quilting just as both qualitative and quantitative researchers have contributions to make to the field of education.

As a doctoral student with a dissertation looming ahead of me, conversations with fellow students often turn to plans for our dissertations. These discussions not only focus on "What's your topic?" but also "Which research methodology are you planning to use?" The conversation then moves to comparing the merits, value, and problems associated with each method. It was during one of these conversations that I suddenly experienced a flashback to another time and a place miles away. This journey had a surprising impact on my understanding of the differences between qualitative and quantitative research.

I once again became a teenager living in Plain City, Ohio, attending a quilting bee hosted by my Amish grandmother. Her friends at the quilting bee were all either Amish or Mennonite women, proficient in the art of quilting. I recognized quilting as part of my cultural heritage and wanted to learn all I could about this process, believing that someday I too would be creating my own work of art and transmitting my knowledge and skills to the next generation. As these plain Amish and Mennonite women shared their stories around a richly colored quilt which contrasted sharply with their plain dress, I heard two distinct stories in answer to my questions: What is the key to making a magnificent quilt? What is the real purpose in designing a quilt? What does one experience during this process?

In soft, intimate tones, Sarah told me the story of her first quilt. This quilt was not only to cover her bed, but one to dream under, to provide comfort, to lovingly pat into place each morning as she faced another day, and to mirror her life. "Each quilt has its own personality and message," Sarah explained, "and the purpose of my first quilt was to share who I am and how I see life."

What quilt pattern and fabrics would be able to adequately communicate this vital message? While life is full of hope and promise, it's not all pleasant. Some days are dark and gray when hope and joy are but distant memories. Consequently, Sarah knew her quilt needed both light and

dark shades. After all, how can the soft, light colors be appreciated if they aren't contrasted with the darker hues and combined with in between shades for the ordinary days?

Sarah decided that the log cabin quilt pattern which incorporates both light and dark colors would typify her life. This pattern consists of contrasting light and dark strips and a small center square to pull together the light and dark colors. The strips and small squares are initially pieced together into larger squares which are then joined into overall designs such as Light-and-Dark, Barn Raising, Straight Furrow, or Log Cabin Star.

Though undecided exactly which design she would use to eventually join her log cabin squares, Sarah chose her fabric pieces. Fabric for the center square of each block was a warm, solid-colored, bright mauve to represent the warmth of family times at home and the fellowship of friends so commonplace in Amish circles. The three dark fabric pieces she chose varied greatly: a deep country blue with black designs; a gorgeous paisley artistically combining mauve, country blue, and tan; and a floral print. The darkest piece reminded Sarah of those dreary, lonely winter days after her husband died and she struggled to find hope and meaning in life while the remaining dark colors represented those miscellaneous times when the journey proved challenging but not to the point despair.

Sarah's face softened and lit up with hope and joy as she spoke about the lighter colors she chose for her quilt. They reminded her of calm summer days with gentle breezes just perfect for gardening, of days when all of life seemed smooth and promising. Sarah paused thoughtfully before continuing, "My favorite piece has a country blue background with large tan and mauve flowers on it. Though it's considered a dark piece, it most closely resembles how I see life. I can choose to focus on the dark or the light aspects and that's what I see. Life is like that; my experience reflects my focus."

While creating the log cabin squares, Sarah continued contemplating which overall design to use for joining her squares. What were the squares saying to her? What design best fit the personality of her quilt? After laying out the squares she finally chose the Log Cabin Star pattern because adding a large star to her quilt took the ordinariness out of the log cabin blocks and made them unique, like her life. Sarah went on to give me this advice, "Always purchase extra fabric because quilts have a mind of their own and often ask for changes midstream!"

I saw Sarah's quilt and read its message. The craftsmanship reflected the careful instructions of Sarah's mother who had taught her this art; its colors and design reflected Sarah's life and the story was retold by her face--dominated by crinkles of joy and laughter but interspersed with lines of sorrow and difficulty. This was indeed a work of art and mirrored her life!

Elizabeth's story was quite different. She chose to make a Straight Furrow Log Cabin quilt because that was the pattern both her mother and grandmother had chosen for their first quilts and reflected the emphasis on conformity so prevalent in her Amish community. She carefully measured how much fabric would be required for each of her seven fabric pieces. At the store she was fortunate enough to find her fabric on sale so she paid only \$65.74 for all the quilting supplies she needed. She predicted that her quilt would be 84 in. by 107 in. which would be large enough to cover a queen-sized bed.

After purchasing her supplies, Elizabeth began the process of cutting the fabrics into strips that were 1 1/2 in. wide with a 1/4 in. seam allowance, giving each strip a finished size of 1 in. She carefully sewed together her strips around a 1 in. center square and was pleased to discover that each of her log cabin squares measured exactly 11 in. by 11 in. When sewn together and after adding two borders, the quilt was indeed the perfect 84 in. by 107 in. queen-sized quilt she had anticipated.

Elizabeth began her quilting project November 1 and was finished by April 15 of the following year. During this time she devoted an average of 15 hours per week to the project and still possessed the chart where she kept a daily record of time spent on the quilt. She used a total of 1,278 yards of quilting thread to make thousands of tiny stitches.

At the close of Elizabeth's account, she too showed me her quilt. Using a measuring tape, she verified that each strip was indeed 1 in. wide. She then measured the length and width to prove that it was actually 84 in. by 107 in. and would fit other queen-sized beds.

As I compared Sarah and Elizabeth's stories, I noticed that Sarah was intimately and personally acquainted with her quilt while Elizabeth distanced herself emotionally from her project. Both ladies were concerned about quality, but for Sarah that meant representing life and creating a message that others could understand and relate to personally. For Elizabeth quality meant a quilt that could be appreciated for its precision and be duplicated by others. I saw Sarah and myself in her quilt while I was awed by Elizabeth's knowledge and skill. I've concluded that each approach has merit since both contributed to my understanding of this exquisite art.

I see connections between my experience at the quilting bee and the current discussions with peers comparing qualitative and quantitative research. Sarah and Elizabeth had different stories to tell because they had different objectives just like our research approaches, experiences, and questions vary. Both of these Amish ladies contributed to the art of quilting and produced finished products which were noteworthy, and both qualitative and quantitative researchers have the opportunity to contribute to the field of education in spite of their diverse approaches and philosophies. Instead of asking which method has a worthier process and produces a better product, conversations with fellow doctoral students should focus on which method matches our individual goals and enables us to tell the story we desire to share.

### **Author Note**

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