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Qualitative Research—What Is It, Anyway?

by

Judy B. Lindamood

Preface

I have struggled with these thoughts for some time. Every researcher needs an intimate view of the process to be used ... but, a personal statement of “qualitative” research? How could I get that down on paper without boring myself? I am sure I don’t want to write sixteen pages quoting Eisner or Peshkin or any others! And, if I bore myself, how could that be anything very personal?

And yet this comparison of one world view to another has been in and out of my mind for weeks. So I offer a glimpse into this corner of my consciousness. (Probably Mr. Freud would find some interesting aspects here also ...).

* * * * *

He was the father.

She was the daughter.

He was the researcher—a real scientist.

She was just a teacher.

He had a real laboratory—clean, sterile, all the beakers had a place.

She had a laboratory, too, sort of, but it was contaminated with people, people, people.

Nobody ever stayed in one place.

He went to work every day, every night, in the lab, alone, poring over the test tubes, his eye to the microscope.

She went every day—engaged, listening, recording, observing. She spent every night—thinking and thinking.

He was obsessed with how. How do I make it work? How does it happen? What are the right combinations? Can we make it happen every time? How? How? How?

She was compulsive. What? If we figure enough “whats” maybe we can find some combinations here. Do you suppose those “whats” would make some “whys”—maybe we could learn more. Keep asking “what.”

He was living a life—full, complete, enthralled, but alone with his problem.

She was living a life—full, complete, enthralled, but rich with relationships sharing her questions.

He was so alone with his problem that he once thought he was the problem, but, no, it was only research, it wasn’t an extension of himself. “Don’t be foolish,” he’d think, “I’m a scientist, not an emotional softy.”

She was so engrossed in her question that she didn’t realize how much she’d dwelt on it—she just lived it. She did know she was an instrument in this because it fit into the purposes she’d pursued throughout her career. Maybe she was foolish, and she was a softy, for sure, but she liked herself that way.

He recorded, reported, presented, attended, consulted, re-recorded, and published. And then he got rewarded—in number. Count, count, count. How much, how many, when, where, how? Is it valid? Is it reliable? Does it correlate? Now let’s replicate. Again and again and again.

She recorded in detail, particular by particular. Interpret, interpret, interpret, interpret. What? What? What? What? What? She presented—oh no!! She'd missed seventeen other "whats." Keep remembering, it's great to have other perspectives. It's part of the process. Back to the detail. Again and again and again.

His language was terse and non-expressive. After all, he was looking for product. And, look at who is reading this material. His colleagues understood "terse." Objectivity, you know. It's got to be.

Her language was precise but expressive. Coherence and insight into a believable set of detail. After all, it is a process. And, look who is reading this material. Her peers lived the process daily with these people, people, people. Subjective, you know. It's got to be. He knew it was his life's work. He just couldn't figure out how it fit into his other parts as a man.

She knew it was her life's work. It was clear she was integrally a part of its definition. It really didn't have anything to do with being a woman. Or did it? (Careful, don't get too cocky here, lady.) Every week she learned new things about herself from this work. (Hey, what is this anyway?)

He lived his life in compartments. His research was over there. Too complex/too boring/too everything for all of us out here. Come to think of it, he counted and measured and generalized in his other compartments, too—fatherhood, marriage, friendships. He really was a bit detached.

She lived life in integration. She struggled to fit the parts together. To merge the parts, to find the right questions, to ask, to watch. She was connected—some people even called her nosy.

He was the father.
She was the daughter.
He was the father. Did she influence him? Unknown quantity.
She was the daughter. Did he influence her? Qualitatively and hard to measure. Her observations tell her that. (Uh oh!! Secretly, sometimes she has such an urge to count and measure she just has to do it.)
He was the father. The first generation off the farm.
She was the daughter. A second generation of thinkers.
Back then, she didn't get it. Remember that outburst in adolescence when she screamed, "I hate research—why do you do this stuff!?"
He is my father.
I am his daughter.
Now I understand enough to ask some more.

Postscript

In the spirit of artistic scholarship, I dedicated this to my first teacher, my father. And, to the fond memories of my first research endeavor, "THE BUG LAB." Even then he said, "Find as many different kinds of bugs as you can." Secretly, I discovered just what color blood green tomato worms really had.