fen-om

Theory

Interpretive-Contemporary Research

Introduction:
Although this type of research can take many different forms, all of these typically have a number of important characteristics in common. Interpretive-contemporary researchers study things in their natural settings, making sense of data in terms of the meanings people bring to it (the subject of research is usually an individual, as opposed to an object). The most obvious difference between interpretive-contemporary and interpretive-historical research is that the first is more concerned with data collection involving people, while interpretive-historical research typically relies on documents and other material artifacts. Thus these 2 strategies tend to be combined, as one augments the characteristics of the other.

General Characteristics:
◆ Emphasis on natural settings: The subject of research is not removed from what surrounds it in everyday life. The context should not be altered for the study to be conducted.
◆ Focus on interpretation and meaning: It is important for researchers to interpret and make sense of data.
◆ Respondents in their own context: The setting or phenomenon is represented as the respondents understand it. To make this possible, interpretive-contemporary researchers necessarily must focus on a single case or small number of cases.
◆ Multiple tactics: A preferred approach is 'bricolage' (a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem in a concrete situation).
◆ Holistic approach: The goal is to gain a 'holistic' overview (systematic, encompassing, integrated).
◆ Prolonged contact: Intense or prolonged contact with the context.
◆ Open-ended: No definite answer is necessary.
◆ Researcher as measurement device: Little use of standardized measures (survey questionnaires, etc.). The researcher is essentially the main 'measurement device' in the study.
◆ Analysis through words or images: This type of research avoids descriptive numerical measures and inferential statistics. Strong reliance on unstructured data.
◆ Personal informal writing stance: Writing style is typically informal (this lessens the distance between writer and reader).

Three Main Approaches:
◆ Grounded Theory: Here the researcher seeks to enter a setting without preset opinions, lets the goings-on of the setting determine the data, and then lets a theory emerge from that data. This process simultaneously uses data-collection, coding (data-analysis), and memoing (theory-building). These steps are typical of all interpretive-contemporary research; however, it is more peculiar of grounded theory to double back-and-forth between the steps.
◆ Ethnography: Here the purpose is to provide a rich and full delineation of a particular setting, that simply persuades a wide audience of its human validity (not much focus on theory-making/ conclusion-drawing). Also, an important focus here tends to be 'culture' (typically applied to non-Western cultures or Western sub-cultures).
◆ Interpretivism: This approach attempts to understand a complex situation from the point of view of those who live it. Much of the focus is on 'pre-logical' interpretation (intuition beyond categorization; based on Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology).

Tactics:
The process is divided into data-collection, data-reduction, data-display, verification, and conclusion-drawing:
> ◆ Data-collection: Numerous in-depth interviews, long periods of participant observation, organization of focus groups.
> ◆ Data-reduction: Because qualitative research typically results in a vast amount

of data, a major task here is to reduce the volume of data into manageable 'chunks'. A common device is to code data into various themes (a coding scheme that should be clearly documented). This coding is based on what could be described (counting data cases, noting patterns, labeling plausibility), analyzed (comparing data), or explained (logical-chains of data-driven evidence, conceptual-theoretical bonds).

◆ Verification: data representativeness, triangulation, if-then tests, eliminating spurious relationships, 'unpatterns' (focusing on extreme/ minor cases, following up surprises, and looking for negative evidence), getting feedback.

◆ Data-display: Charts, graphs, or tables. These vary depending on the audience who will read them (journal articles are likely to provide fewer, while books, dissertations, and professional reports are likely to provide more, with many displays appearing in indexes).

Strengths and Weaknesses:

Strengths:
- ◘. Rich and holistic approach.
- ◘. Flexibility.
- ◘. Gives importance to meanings and processes.

Weaknesses:
- ◘. The vast quantities of data can become unmanageable.
- ◘. There are few guidelines.
- ◘. The credibility of the data can become suspect if not reinforced by peer-review processes.

Recommended Readings:

Barney Glaser, 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (1967): For more information on the grounded theory approach.

James Clifford, 'Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography' (1986): For more information on ethnography.

Clifford Geertz, 'Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology' (1983): For more information on the interpretivist approach.