

## FIVE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES AND THEIR APPLICATIONS IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Five qualitative research approaches are presented in this article including information about data collection methods, data analysis techniques, sampling, reporting, and validation. Each of these techniques is described separately with discussion about why a researcher might choose to use a qualitative research approach rather than follow a strict experimental or quantitative protocol. The qualitative approaches outlined are narratives, case studies, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnographies. In addition, a brief discussion of transpersonal qualitative approaches is included to introduce the reader to the perspectives of the transpersonal researcher. Finally, multiple examples are provided from the field of parapsychology that discuss how each approach could be applied to help advance the understanding of the psi experience and to contribute to future quantitative studies. Parapsychological researchers are encouraged to develop a better understanding of the value of qualitative research techniques outside of a laboratory environment and to utilize the results of qualitative studies to structure and develop better experimental methodologies in the laboratory setting.

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Experimental approaches to parapsychology have always been considered the pinnacle of research and the primary source of scientific information for the field, but the rich tapestry of information available from people who have spontaneous psi experiences is essential to expand our knowledge of the field. From the case collections of Louisa Rhine (1961, 1967, 1975, 1981), to the in-depth studies of specific individuals (Curry, 2008; Mishlove, 2000), to the cultural explorations of the Huna (Long, 1948) and Balinese (Edge, 1996; Edge & Suryani, 2001), parapsychologists and anthropologists have been exploring human experiences of psi in an attempt to pull back the curtain and expose the inner workings of individuals, groups, and cultures that have integrated psi into their daily lives. If these explorations are to be considered scientific and viable research projects, there is a clear need for a defined and precise research methodology. Qualitative analysis techniques have advanced significantly over the past 30 years, and traditional scientific principles have been defined for the entire process of exploring human experience outside of the laboratory setting. The world of parapsychology has begun to recognize the value of qualitative analysis techniques and among other publications at least one new journal, *Exceptional Experiences*, was created in 2013 with the directive to explore psi utilizing qualitative methodology. This renewed attention to qualitative methodologies and explorations outside of the laboratory is providing a new perspective on psi phenomena that is often overlooked in the laboratory setting (Cardena, 2010), and very well-defined and controlled procedures, analyses, and reporting methods are being used to help to uncover the thought processes and experiences of people who produce or encounter psi phenomena.

As seen in recent issues of *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *Journal of Exceptional Experiences*, and the *Journal of Parapsychology*, with a few exceptions (e.g., Wooffitt, Holt, & Allistone, 2010), the recent studies that are applying qualitative methodologies to parapsychology are utilizing a phenomenological approach to examine the nature of specific psi experiences. The phenomenological approaches in these published studies have been defined and refined in order for them to be applied more appropriately to the study of psi experiences (e.g., Coyle, 2010; Wilde & Murray, 2010), and the value of these explorations in the field can be seen, for example, in Rock, Storm, Harris, and Freidman's (2013) study of shamanic

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journeying and Williams, Dutton, and Burgess's (2010) exploration of energy healing experiences. As the value of qualitative studies becomes more apparent, it is essential that parapsychologists understand the true nature of qualitative approaches and the variety of approaches that are available to researchers outside of the laboratory. This introduction to qualitative methodologies will provide an overview of a few of the major types of qualitative methods that are commonly used in the field of psychology, anthropology, and sociology. In addition, it will provide insight into the scientific characteristics of the qualitative approaches to sampling, data gathering, data analysis, validation, reliability, and reporting.

No discussion of qualitative research in parapsychology would be complete without including transpersonal research methods. Though a thorough exploration of transpersonal approaches to qualitative research is beyond the scope of this paper, some of the basic principles of transpersonal methods will be presented to provide a very brief introduction to the topic. Finally, I will discuss a few potential applications of the basic qualitative approaches in the field of parapsychology.

This general introduction is not meant to be complete and comprehensive in scope, but rather it is meant to provide the foundation for understanding qualitative techniques and how they are applied based on modern scientific principles.

### **What Is Qualitative Research?**

The purpose of qualitative research, as is the case with any research, is to provide unbiased and reliable information in a format that is relevant and meaningful to the target audience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although some qualitative approaches recognize and embrace the biased perspective of the researcher (e.g., many ethnographies involve the researcher becoming immersed in the cultural experience to facilitate a personal perspective), all research, including qualitative research, strives to provide useful information about a topic. So how is qualitative research different than the traditional quantitative research methods that are used in experimental environments? A number of the differences described below are presented by Patton (2002) in *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.

Participants in qualitative research studies are often referred to as co-researchers due to their extensive participation in the development of the research methodologies and their typical interest in exploring the nature of the studied phenomena, along with the research team. In this document, the terms "participant" and "co-researcher" will be used to refer to the person who is having the experience or who is the target of the investigation.

### **Objective Versus Subjective and Controlled Versus Natural**

Quantitative researchers attempt to provide an objective investigation of a phenomenon in the controlled environment of the laboratory. In contrast, qualitative research is by definition subjective (but non-judgmental) in nature and most investigations are performed in a natural setting where the participants or co-researchers are most comfortable and where the topic can be examined in the environment where it is most commonly observed. Although controlled settings and objectivity have traditionally been the hallmarks of sound scientifically gathered information, the laboratory environment is not conducive to the demonstration of many phenomena, and when dealing with people, all observations and experiences are subjective in nature. Contrary to traditional scientific methodologies, qualitative researchers do not attempt to control the situation, participants, and the environment but rather embrace the concept that all of our experiences are different and that subjectivity is a natural characteristic of human experience. Qualitative researchers examine this subjective experience to explore common themes and extract the information from language, behaviors, and implied meaning that is expressed in everyday life.

### **Instruments and Tools**

Experimental researchers utilize carefully tested and reliable instruments to measure activity and behavior within clearly defined and specified parameters. Qualitative researchers rely on loosely structured

interviews and natural observation to allow the co-researchers to provide information in a way that will most clearly reveal the nature of their experiences and allow for maximum expression of the subjective experience. While qualitative researchers encourage co-researchers to provide information using language that is most comfortable for them, the interview process is structured to keep the conversation on track and maintain a thread of meaning in the interview. Qualitative research depends on the skills and diligence of the researcher to utilize interviewing techniques to gather data. The researcher is the data collection tool, and the records collected by the researchers are the source materials used in the analysis process.

Some qualitative research methods include data collected from formal documents, conversations, informal documents such as diaries or letters, photographs, or many other sources that are not quantitative in nature. The significant number of different qualitative approaches that are available give the researcher a large amount of flexibility in choosing the source materials for the analysis. In each case, the essential instrument and tool for data collection is the researcher and the structured approach provided by the qualitative method that is selected.

## **Hypotheses**

One of the most important characteristics of a sound quantitative study is the establishment of a clear and concise hypothesis that is defined before any experimental work begins and is used as the foundation for the full methodology and the selected analysis method. Without a clear hypothesis, experimental research is often considered to be unreliable or exploratory at best—a classification that is frowned upon in strict experimental settings. Qualitative research studies typically begin with a research question or a loosely formulated hypothesis that is purposefully modified and adapted as the study progresses. The data gathered during interviews may indicate that the existing hypothesis is incomplete or even incorrect, but this does not invalidate a qualitative study. On the contrary, hypotheses often emerge from the data gathering process to help inform the researchers and participants how they may better explore the research question.

This may appear to be an unstructured and improvised approach to research, but just as many improvisational comedy routines seem to be unstructured, there is typically a very structured and defined method behind the improvisation. Such is the case with qualitative research. The changes to the hypotheses and research approaches may occur while the data are being gathered, but the changes are well documented, controlled, and verified before they are implemented as part of the study. In other words, as the interviews and other data produce additional information, the researchers reevaluate their assumptions and adjust their activities to suit the new data.

## **Sample Size and Timeframe**

In order to establish a sound statistical analysis process, it is necessary to define an appropriate sample size. Many experimental research studies are criticized if the sample size is not well defined before the study begins as this would allow researchers to collect data until the desired results are confirmed. This approach is appropriate when dealing with controlled studies aimed at rejecting or confirming a predefined hypothesis using established statistical methods. The same approach is not appropriate for a study that is intended to explore a research question to its full extent and to learn everything that can be learned about the subjective nature of an experience or behavior.

Though qualitative approaches have different needs related to sample sizes, for many qualitative studies a sample size is proposed but the study continues and more participants are recruited until the researcher is confident that enough information has been collected to address the research question. As more information is gathered, it may conflict with previous information. This is not considered a problem in qualitative research, but rather it is an indication that additional study is needed. Qualitative studies often have a changing sample size and an undefined timeframe. The project continues until the researcher has a level of confidence in the information that has been gathered.

Typically, sample sizes in qualitative studies are guided by the principles of data saturation. Qualitative studies should collect enough data to provide answers to the research questions, while recognizing

that there is a point of diminishing returns when the data become repetitive or do not add to the knowledge of the project (Mason, 2010). Other factors can influence the size of a sample in a qualitative study (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003), but the researcher must be confident that the sample elucidates most or all opinions related to the topic under investigation.

### **Summary of Qualitative Research Methodology**

In essence, qualitative research utilizes the skills of the researcher as the data collection instrument, and inductive rather than deductive data analysis techniques are used. Both the similarities and the differences of the data are examined, and the reports are written in expressive language to capture the character of the experience of the participants. The results typically include great detail and examples from the participants' specific statements, which provides for a more natural presentation of information in a format that is familiar to the reader and similar to the reader's experience in the world.

### **Why Do Qualitative Research?**

When considering the loosely structured and uncontrolled nature of qualitative research, many experimental researchers wonder why they would want to do this type of research work. Laboratory work is easily understood, well established, and carefully structured to avoid the intrusion of subjective experiences. Sound data are collected and analyzed using methods that assist the researcher in maintaining a distance from the experiencer and assessing performance from a protected environment that improves the quality of the information that is gathered. So, why would a researcher choose to do a study using a method that breaks down these barriers and not only allows subjective information to infect the data, but actually embraces the subjective perspective?

### **Overcoming Barriers**

There are some topics or experiences that are obscure or so uncommon that they require more research before a hypothesis can effectively be determined. When trying to examine these topics, quantitative methodology does not provide the flexibility necessary to inductively produce a hypothesis from the data. These topics require a substantial amount of information gathering and review in order to better understand how to appropriately express a hypothesis that sufficiently captures the target topic. In other words, a significant amount of research must be done in a qualitative way before a hypothesis can be clearly defined.

In other cases, it is either impossible or extremely inconvenient to bring a situation into the laboratory. The laboratory environment may substantially change the nature of the experience and the experience may not be reproducible in the lab. For example, to explore the nature of psi activity in the Huna culture it is not viable to reproduce the environment in the lab, and to bring representatives of the Huna people into the lab may have a significant effect on their experience that would corrupt the data and reduce the validity of the information provided by the research. In these cases, it would be more valuable to perform this research in the field, where behaviors and experiences can be observed first-hand in a more clear and direct manner.

### **Additional Contributions of Qualitative Research Methods**

Qualitative research often produces categories or insights that can later be used as factors or variables in quantitative studies. Through the exploration of interviews, experiences, and behaviors, specific thematic insights often arise from qualitative analyses. These insights and the classification of information gathered during the qualitative analysis process can inform researchers as to the nature of the phenomena in such a way that they can utilize this information to produce new quantitative studies based on these specific factors that were discovered in a qualitative review. Another very important factor to consider when performing research is the audience of the research. Most quantitative research studies are designed to appeal

to an academic or professional audience. In these cases, the general public typically cannot understand the information, and the research community is dependent upon third parties to correctly interpret their results so that they can be presented to the general public in a more accessible language. Qualitative reporting is purposely written in a very accessible and clear manner in order to allow nonscientific readers to understand the results. Often this is done in order to help describe the results to the co-researchers who participated in providing the data for the study. In other words, qualitative reports are accessible and written for the non-scientific audience, which lessens the need for third party interpretation and makes the information available to people who may not be experts regarding the target topic. Though qualitative research can assist in the development of quantitative studies, qualitative studies also have a value in their own right. Roxburgh and Roe (2013) used qualitative methods to explore the experience of mediums by giving them a voice, recognizing their expertise in the area of study, and acknowledging their experiences in the context of their culture. Wilde and Murray (2010) explored out of body and near death experiences using interviews and an exploration of the cultural factors that may influence the personal experience and reporting of these phenomena. Qualitative studies can also provide insight into the effectiveness of interventions after a quantitative study has been completed (Peters, Ruiter, & Kok, 2014). These examples demonstrate how qualitative methods stand on their own as valuable research tools independent of their value to quantitative studies.

### **Reasons to Use Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research methods are designed to provide important information about topics and experiences, but they are not limited by the strictly controlled laboratory methods that are prevalent in experimental research settings. Despite the fact that there are fewer controls in qualitative research studies, there is a defined structure which will be explored in more detail later in this paper. The lack of controls provides for greater flexibility in the exploration of topics while still providing new information that can assist in further study, often in a laboratory environment.

### **When to Choose Qualitative Research**

What follows is a very brief list of some of the reasons that a researcher may choose to perform qualitative research. This list is not meant to be all inclusive, but it is an example of some of the factors that may encourage a researcher to select a qualitative methodology instead of trying to adapt research to a quantitative method.

Consider a qualitative method when:

1. Very little is known about the topic being studied and more exploration is needed to develop a working hypothesis.
2. The research topic cannot be brought into the laboratory or when it is more appropriate to do the data collection in the participants' natural environment.
3. There is a very small sample available for the study.
4. The data are in verbal, video, or textual format only.
5. No theory exists to describe a phenomenon.

### **Types of Qualitative Research**

There are hundreds of different types of qualitative research methods, but there are some major methodologies that are commonly applied in the social sciences. Five different types of qualitative research as described in Creswell's (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* will be discussed below. For each type, the discussion will include:

1. The type of problem that is best suited for each method
2. The focus of the study or the character of the sample



3. The data collection method
4. The data analysis method
5. The character and nature of the report

In the process of reviewing each method, additional information will be provided to clarify why each approach is different and how each approach can best be used in the exploration of the target topic. The five types of qualitative research that will be described are narrative, case study, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethnography.

### **Narrative**

Narratives are similar to storytelling. They involve identifying significant events, placing them in a time constrained order, and relating the information. The focus of a narrative is typically a single individual or a group. Data are collected using interviews and documentation and sometimes correspondence, journals, or diaries. The data are transcribed to facilitate the data analysis process. The data analysis associated with narratives involves reading the collected data multiple times to become completely familiar with the contents. Themes are identified within the story, and significant events are identified. The information is reordered chronologically and the events are presented as a narrative about the life and experiences of an individual.

### **Case Study**

A case study is the exploration of a *bounded system* from multiple perspectives. The term “bounded system” refers to a single case that can easily be differentiated from other cases. The case is the object of the study, and that case may be an individual, an event, or a series of events clearly bounded and differentiated from other events.

Case studies are intended to develop a detailed understanding of a single case or a number of similar cases by examination of the case from multiple perspectives. The focus of a case study is the specific case being studied, and the goal is to provide an in-depth understanding of that case. Data collection in a case study typically includes multiple sources, including interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts. Data analysis typically includes an analysis of the individual case descriptions, the development of themes within the cases, and an exploration for cross-case themes that seem to apply to multiple similar cases. The report of a case study includes a detailed description and analysis of a single case or possibly multiple cases.

### **Phenomenology**

A phenomenological study is aimed at understanding the essence of an experience. There are many different variations of the phenomenological model, but in each model, the focus is on the experience that is being examined, not on any individuals who are having the experience. Data collection primarily consists of interviews with individuals who have had a specific experience, but it can also include focus groups, or a review of documents, observations, writings, and even works of art.

The major methods of phenomenological analysis were presented by the Empirical Phenomenological method described by Giorgi (1985) and the Transcendental Phenomenology of Moustakas (1994). The analysis and reporting methods described below include elements of these techniques, but the reader would be best served by reviewing the primary sources for complete details of the phenomenological processes. Much of the information is vital to performing a sound phenomenological study, but it is too detailed for an introduction to the topic.

When analyzing data for phenomenology, the process is detailed and very structured. Typically it includes multiple judges who first identify significant statements in the transcripts. Units of meaning are then separated within the data, and textual and structural descriptions are identified to give the descriptions

a more clearly structured format. Extraneous words are removed and the data units are broken down into categories that are illustrated with direct text and quotes from within the original data. These categories arise from the data using an inductive process, and they are some of the major components of the experimental results. The categories are reviewed, collated, and combined to create super-categories that become the building blocks for the essence of the experience.

Finally, the reporting of a phenomenological study provides a description of the essence of an experience in plain language that can be easily understood and presented to the reader.

**Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA).** This is a very popular phenomenological method that has often been used by parapsychologists (e.g., Drinkwater, Dagnall, & Bate, 2013; Rock et al., 2013; Roxburgh & Roe, 2013; Wilde & Murray, 2010). IPA researchers approach experiences in context and recognize that no experience can be understood without first recognizing that the experience is being interpreted by an individual (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). With a thorough understanding of an individual and a thorough understanding of an experience, a researcher is more likely to gain insight into the experience of the individual and increase their understanding of the phenomenon. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) suggest that experiences involve multiple levels of reflection and cognition. Only with a clear understanding of individual psychology, societal pressures, cultural norms, and situational factors can a researcher gain a clear understanding of any experience. Also, researchers must consider their personal biases, beliefs, and experiences in order to recognize how personal influences may affect their interpretation of the experience and the individual having the experience (Moustakas, 1994; White, 1998). Throughout this detailed exploration of the individuals and the situations surrounding an experience, as is the case with every phenomenological examination, the focus remains on the phenomenon being studied, not on the individual.

IPA is a valuable tool for researchers and is currently a very popular approach to qualitative analysis, but it is by no means the best way to study every psi phenomenon. Each situation must be evaluated individually, and the appropriate approach must be selected to suit the situation. Many qualitative approaches explore experiences in the context of the people involved in the processes, and the appropriate approach must be selected based on the purpose of the investigation and the goals of the research.

## **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory research attempts to create a theory of an event, phenomenon, or experience from an exploration of interviews with participants and co-researchers. The problem being addressed focuses on the creation of the theory rather than a description of an experience or an exploration of a specific case. The focus is the development of a grounded theory, which is derived from the data that are gathered in the field.

Data collection for grounded theory research must be broad in nature and include interviews with numerous participants, typically 20–60 people. The sample size is variable and undefined to enable the researcher to collect enough data to formulate a theory that is appropriately derived from the interviews. Due to the pure inductive process utilized in grounded theory research, the time frame for a grounded theory study is unpredictable and dependent on the coherence of the interviews that are collected. Grounded theory research can take months or even years to complete.

The data analysis methods for the development of a grounded theory are iterative and can involve a number of judges. The judges first perform an open-coding evaluation of the interviews in which each individual interview is reviewed for consistency, common themes, and meaning units. General information categories are derived from the preliminary evaluation, and these categories are then confirmed with follow-up discussions with the participants. After each individual interview is reviewed and evaluated by multiple judges, the judges then re-enter the data to perform axial coding. In axial coding, the body of all the interviews is reviewed for thematic consistencies and common experiences. From the axial coding, categories of information will become apparent across the interviews, and more generalized categories can be identified. Axial coding connects the categories that were derived in the initial open coding process. Finally, in order to build a story that connects all of the categories and defines a theory, selective coding is

performed. The categories are reviewed in the context of their connections, and from these associations a story begins to emerge that provides the basis of theory development (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

When reporting grounded theory research, it is essential that the developed theory be presented in the context of the data that have been collected. A clear path must be presented from the data, through the analysis, and to the construction of the theory. Grounded theory is a general method that is time and labor intensive. As Glaser (2000) states, there is a tendency for researchers using this methodology to shortcut or simplify the process in order to shorten the time needed for the analysis. This temptation results in an incomplete approach in which the opinions and attitudes of the researcher are presented rather than the theory that would arise from a complete data analysis. Glaser indicates that a researcher should go with this type of research method only when sufficient resources exist and there is a potential for significant benefit from a complete grounded theory approach.

### **Ethnography**

An ethnographic research is aimed at describing a shared cultural phenomenon experienced by a group and exemplified by patterns of behavior or attitudes within a culture. The focus of an ethnographical study is a group that shares a common culture, but it is not limited to groups united by a cultural heritage. For example, an ethnographical study could examine a group of emergency room workers, single parents, or war veterans.

Data collection in an ethnographical study is typically done through observation and interviews. Additional sources of information are gathered from extended periods of observation in the field. Due to the specific need to examine a culture and behavior patterns, often a researcher of an ethnographic study will become embedded in the research environment and experience the activities of the group first hand. This provides a more clear view of the patterns of behavior and enables the researcher to gather more reliable data.

The data analysis includes an analysis of the descriptions of each member of the group and the development of themes around the group's experiences and activities. Group roles are often identified and a hierarchy or cultural identity often emerges from the collected interviews. The report from an ethnographic study describes how the group experiences and expresses its cultural activities.

An interesting variation on the ethnographic approach is autoethnography, which is a combination of ethnography and autobiography. A researcher will typically recall and document past circumstances related to a personal understanding and exploration of a cultural identity while focusing on the epiphanies that provided a basis for an in-depth personal knowledge (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Besides telling the story as an autobiographer might, an autoethnographer must also examine and analyze the experiences and stories in order to provide validity to the story and to demonstrate how the personal experiences may indicate a more universal theme for a culture (Denzin, 1989). This might be done by comparing the story to existing publications, reviewing the experiences of other people, or supporting the conclusions with cultural artifacts or literature (Boylorn, 2008; Denzin, 2004).

### **A Brief Discussion of Transpersonal Research Methods**

In the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Anthony Sutich (1969) discusses transpersonal psychology as a topic concerned with the scientific study of individual and species needs, values, unitive consciousness, and transcendence of the self. He describes the need for the individual to clearly understand personal limitations and biases in order to transcend those limitations and more clearly recognize the nature of consciousness and the experience of being human in the context of the natural world, cultural contexts, and the spiritual life that is inherent in every person.

When considering a transpersonal perspective in research, Anderson (1998a) describes the need to go beyond the personally identified aspects of the self. Researchers must take into account all perceptions and perspectives, and a transpersonal approach to research should use all available information channels to provide information to address a research question.



### **Integrated Approach**

Rather than selecting a single research approach to explore a topic, Braud (1998) discusses the need to consider the integration of multiple methods including quantitative and qualitative techniques. Through a combination of strictly controlled research methods and a carefully constructed qualitative examination, the researcher can learn more about the participants, the researchers, their moods and attitudes, and how these factors may influence the data that are being collected. Braud called this *integral inquiry*. In more recent terminology, this approach is often considered a mixed-method approach to research where both quantitative and qualitative methods are used, but there is much more to this approach than combining different research techniques. The overall research design must carefully consider any research methods that are used and provide a clear justification for how each approach will contribute to answering the research question. In other words, any and all methods that are applied in a study must produce an integrated method that addresses the goal of the study rather than just mixing the methods.

### **Intuitive Approach**

When gathering data for a research project, there are typically clearly defined sources of information. In the intuitive approach to research, the researcher should consider all possible channels including non-traditional channels of information (Anderson, 1998b). For example, psi should be considered a viable method for gathering information, and all data should be evaluated with a consideration of the source.

Moustakas (1994) discusses *imaginative variations* as a stage in the data analysis process that provides an opportunity for the researcher to explore multiple possibilities and alternative explanations for the study results. Moustakas describes this step as an opportunity for the researcher to consider all of the data from multiple perspectives and to follow an intuitive path that will allow the researcher to explore avenues that may not be apparent in the primary analysis.

The intuitive approach that is presented as a transpersonal research method extends the imaginative variations presented by Moustakas to include the use of psi and the consideration of psi as a source of data within a qualitative research study.

### **Inquiry Informed by Exceptional Human Experience**

Giorgi (1985) discusses the need for researchers to know their own thoughts, feelings, biases, limitations, and prejudices before attempting to engage in a research study on the attitude, beliefs, or activities of another person or group of people. Giorgi clearly indicates that the researcher is part of the research process and must recognize the influence of personality and cultural factors on perception. Giorgi introduces the concept of bracketing as a method to separate personal beliefs and attitudes from the data collection process. In bracketing, the researcher prepares for a data collection session by first consciously acknowledging factors that may influence the perception or understanding of the data. These factors include cultural beliefs and personal attitudes that typically may not be consciously apparent.

In order to acknowledge these factors, the researcher must first know these factors. It is only through a thorough and complete process of self-examination that researchers can recognize their own beliefs, biases, prejudices, and cultural leanings. So, in order to gather accurate information, researchers must first go through a process of self-examination, acknowledge their personal limitation and biases, and review these factors before each data gathering session. Researchers must take steps to consider these factors during data analysis and explore ways to minimize the impact of these factors on the data that are gathered during the study.

Rhea White (1998) takes this idea one step further by recognizing that many of the activities and results of a scientific study can be influenced by the researcher's unconscious or even by psi. The researcher may introduce personal beliefs into a study, even a quantitative study, without a conscious awareness of this influence. Psi may provide inspiration for a research direction, or a precognitive insight may direct research

activities. White discusses the need for a researcher to document and be conscious of all thoughts and feelings during a research study in order to provide more information about the process used in the study.

It is not only essential for a researcher to include this type of information about the events during a study, but White also discusses the need for researchers to document thoughts, feelings, and intuitions while the study is being developed and designed. All of these factors, including the potential for psi influences, contribute to the research process, and they are necessary to provide a more complete understanding of the research and potentially the results of the study.

## **Qualitative Reporting and Validity**

### **Reporting Results**

The reporting methods used in qualitative studies are an essential part of the research approach. Reports should be accessible and informed but written in natural language (Patton, 2002). These reports avoid technical expressions to maintain a readable quality that will appeal to the co-researchers as well as academics who are familiar with the topic. Qualitative reports incorporate quotes and descriptions from the participants to illustrate the themes and categories that emerged from the analysis process.

Due to the subjective nature of the evaluation, it is necessary for researchers to identify their personal biases in the report and to discuss the extent of efforts to remove bias (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, researchers must report on the methods that they used to overcome personal biases during the interpretation and analysis stages. It is essential in qualitative reporting that the researchers include as much information as possible about their reasoning. Descriptions of prioritization, the selection of specific factors and categories, and the process used when identifying a common description of an experience, group, or phenomenon should be explicitly stated in the report.

The description of the phenomena should be provided in natural language, and the report should include not only the similarities of the participants, but also the differences. In qualitative research the differences are as important as the similarities to provide a clear description of the target topic in the context of the study.

### **Validity in Qualitative Studies**

In all research studies, validity is defined as the extent to which a research study measures what it intends to measure. In qualitative research, validity is determined by evaluating four specific factors (Winter, 2000). The first factor is the credibility of the participants and the data that are gathered. If the data are only available from one source, it is less credible than data that are gathered from multiple, independent sources. In addition, the source of the information must be examined for consistency and how well it was maintained. Data security plays a large role in the process of determining credibility, and therefore the validity of the study.

Validity can also be evaluated by examining the transferability of the conclusions that were developed as a result of the study. If the interpretation and conclusions provided by the study can be applied to other situations, the study is more likely valid. Dependability is another factor that affects the validity of the study. If results are repeatedly observed throughout the study, or if there is a clear description about how the activity changes when the context and environment changes, the observed phenomena are more likely associated with the topic that is being studied.

Finally, a very important evaluation of validity is related to how and when the interpretation and results were confirmed with the participants in the study. Repeated confirmations take much more time, but they provide strong evidence that the information presented in the study is in agreement with the experience of the participants. In addition, if the same results and descriptions are confirmed by multiple researchers involved in different studies, it is more likely that the results are valid.

Because personal perspectives play such a large part in qualitative research, it is essential that the experiences of the participants are correctly verified throughout the study. Consistent information that is

provided by multiple participants sets the tone for a valid study, but multiple factors must be examined in order to insure that the study is measuring the factors it intends to measure.

### **Qualitative Publication References**

The purpose of producing reliable and valid results is to provide integrity to the information presented in a report of a qualitative study, but another reason to provide sound and supported results is to assist in meeting the qualifications for publication in professional journals. The information provided above is a summary of some of the important guidelines that will assist in producing a professional study and a valid report, but it is important that any researcher review the guidelines for publication of qualitative research in professional journals, not only in the field of parapsychology, but also in other professional fields where the literature and information could be useful.

Some of the guidelines for publication reference specific tasks and topics that every qualitative report should consider: Own your perspective, provide examples to illustrate your interpretation, support your findings, write a coherent document, and provide general perspectives that arise from specific cases (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999). In addition, standard issues should be considered and addressed in each qualitative report, including ethical considerations, fitness of methodology, analysis techniques, and a clear distinction between the data and interpretations (Social Science & Medicine, 2010). The reader is encouraged to seek out guidelines for publication of qualitative research for professional journals and to review them carefully before considering their design for a qualitative study.

### **Possible Applications in Parapsychology**

The field of parapsychology is rich in the literature of personal experiences, but typically that information is not gathered using established qualitative research methods. Each of the research types described above provides an opportunity for parapsychologists to explore psi utilizing methods that are not typically employed in the laboratory environment.

### **Narratives**

Narratives are typically related to biographies and historical information. Parapsychology is a field with an extensive history and many intriguing personalities. Historical and biographical records can be developed, explored, and enhanced with the application of a precise narrative methodology. For example, Mauskopf and McVaugh's (1980) *The Elusive Science* reviews the origin of parapsychological laboratory research, and Louisa Rhine's (1967) *ESP in Life and Lab* provides a clear narrative of the Duke parapsychology lab along with other insights about the nature of psi.

### **Case Studies**

Extraordinary events or individuals provide a seemingly never-ending source of data for case study analysis. Events as specific as a case of spontaneous healing can be examined from multiple perspectives, and individuals who have exceptional abilities can be considered unique cases. A case study based on the events in the lives of high performing psi experiencers may shed light on the character and factors that contribute to these events. Case studies of the experiences of mediums or investigations of reported cases of anomalous activity, such as hauntings or apparitions, can provide detailed information about the events and engage readers. Subsequent studies can utilize the information gathered from case studies to develop factors and variables that may be used in quantitative studies of these or similar individuals.

### **Phenomenology**

What is PK? What is the nature of an out of body experience? How do shamans experience their

surroundings when they travel to other worlds? All of these questions and many more can be examined using the phenomenological method. Phenomenology is focused on the human experience related to a specific phenomenon. It is not essential to demonstrate that the phenomena being studied actually occurred or can be captured in a laboratory environment. Phenomenology focuses only on the human experience of the phenomena. Besides interviews with people who have experienced psi phenomena, collections of reports of psi experiences can be collated and examined using a phenomenological approach to help reveal the nature of a specific type of experience.

In cases where the phenomena have been demonstrated in a laboratory setting, a phenomenological examination can assist with process-oriented research that attempts to describe how a phenomenon occurs or is performed. Phenomenology currently is a popular qualitative topic in parapsychology, and it will continue to be a method of choice until scientists can clearly understand the mechanisms behind psi.

### **Grounded Theory**

One of the major hurdles for parapsychologists is the development of a theory that describes psi phenomena and why they appear to be explicitly demonstrated so infrequently and by so few individuals. When sufficient time and funding exist for an extensive examination of a process or event, it may be possible to produce a singular theory that will include testable hypotheses. Using a grounded theory approach, there is potential for the exploration of topics that examine the relationship between PK and other psi abilities. This approach can also be used to examine questions such as whether there are differences between remote viewing and out-of-body experiences, and, if so, why.

The important aspect of grounded theory research is that the theory must emerge from the collected data, and that the researchers must be sure to follow the complete process in order to insure validity and reliability of the generated theory. Grounded theory research is a very long process, but the rewards can be great if it is applied meticulously and if the researchers follow through.

### **Ethnography**

The culture of psi is unique, and there are very well defined groups of experiencers and researchers within the field. The culture of energetic healers, Reiki professionals, remote viewers, lucid dreamers, and many other groups can be studied using an ethnographical approach. Parapsychologists work together more or less effectively based on their culture. What is the culture of an effective and productive parapsychology laboratory? In a more traditional sense, an ethnographic study can be used to examine the psi beliefs and psi experiences of different ethnic or cultural groups. Even religious organizations can be examined to identify how psi events are represented in their cultures. There are many opportunities for ethnographical research within parapsychology.

### **Summary**

Qualitative researchers utilize a variety of methods to gather, analyze, and report on information that enhances the quality of research in the social sciences. Five specific methods have been presented along with a brief introduction to the purpose and application of each of these methods. These five methods do not encompass all of the methods used in the social sciences, but they are representative of some of the major approaches to qualitative research.

A brief introduction to transpersonal research methods was provided to introduce the reader to these topics and as a guide for further study. Though this introduction is brief and perhaps incomplete in some sections, the purpose is not to provide a complete explanation of transpersonal psychology or of the potential research methods that could result from a transpersonal approach. This overview of the transpersonal approaches is meant to provide insight into research methods that are not typically considered in quantitative or qualitative research.

Parapsychology is a field that could benefit from the application of qualitative research techniques. The lack of a comprehensive theory of psi experiences and the many undefined processes related to psi demonstrate a need for a greater understanding of the experiences of the individuals who regularly produce psi effects. Qualitative research techniques provide a flexibility and an inductive process that are not appropriate for laboratory experiments but that give the researchers an opportunity to include descriptive data in their studies to help reveal the true nature of psi.

The experiences of people who regularly demonstrate psi hold a great deal of information that can provide guidance for future quantitative research studies. Through the application of rigorous and consistent qualitative research methods, the entire science of parapsychology will move forward in the quest to understand consciousness and design better tests to examine the nature of psi.

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### Abstracts in Other Languages

#### German

#### FUENF QUALITATIVE FORSCHUNGSZUGAENGE UND IHRE ANWENDUNGEN IN DER PARAPSYCHOLOGIE

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Fünf qualitative Forschungszugänge werden in diesem Artikel vorgestellt einschließlich einer Information zu den Methoden der Datenerhebung, zu Techniken der Datenanalyse, zur Stichprobenerhebung, Berichterstattung und Bewertung. Jede dieser Techniken wird getrennt beschrieben und diskutiert, warum ein Forscher sich eher entschließt, einen qualitativen Forschungszugang einzuschlagen, als einem streng experimentellen oder qualitativen Protokoll zu folgen. Die dargestellten qualitativen Zugänge sind narrative Interviews, Fallstudien, Phänomenologie, Grounded Theory („gegenstandsbezogene Theoriebildung“) und Ethnographien. Zusätzlich werden kurz transpersonale qualitative Zugänge diskutiert, um dem Leser eine Vorstellung von den Perspektiven eines transpersonalen Forschers zu geben. Abschließend werden mehrere Beispiele aus der parapsychologischen Forschung vorgestellt, an denen gezeigt wird, wie jeder Zugang das Verständnis von Psi-Erfahrungen verbessern und zu zukünftigen quantitativen

Studien beitragen kann. Parapsychologische Forscher werden ermutigt, ein besseres Verständnis für den Wert qualitativer Forschungstechniken außerhalb der Laborumgebung zu entwickeln und die Ergebnisse qualitativer Studien heranzuziehen, um bessere experimentelle Methodologien innerhalb des Laborzugangs zu strukturieren und zu entwickeln.

*Spanish*

CINCO ENFOQUES DE INVESTIGACIÓN CUALITATIVA  
Y SUS APLICACIONES A LA PARAPSIKOLOGÍA

RESUMEN: Se presentan cinco enfoques de investigación cualitativa en este artículo, incluyendo información sobre los métodos de recolección de datos, técnicas de análisis de datos, toma de muestras, informes, y validación. Cada una de estas técnicas se describe por separado con una discusión sobre por qué un investigador puede optar por utilizar un enfoque de investigación cualitativa en lugar de seguir un estricto protocolo experimental o cuantitativo. Los enfoques cualitativos delineados son: narrativas, estudios de casos, fenomenología, teoría fundamentada (grounded theory), y etnografías. Además, una breve discusión de los enfoques cualitativos transpersonales se incluye para presentarle al lector las perspectivas del investigador transpersonal. Por último, varios ejemplos del campo de la parapsicología se proporcionan para discutir cómo se podría aplicar cada enfoque para ayudar a avanzar la comprensión de la experiencia psi y contribuir a futuros estudios cuantitativos. Se alienta a los investigadores parapsicológicos a obtener una mejor comprensión del valor de las técnicas cualitativas de investigación fuera de un entorno de laboratorio y a utilizar los resultados de los estudios cualitativos para estructurar y desarrollar mejores metodologías experimentales en el laboratorio.

*French*

CINQ APPROCHES DE RECHERCHE QUALITATIVES  
ET LEURS APPLICATIONS EN PARAPSIKOLOGIE

RESUME : Cinq approches de recherche qualitative sont présentées dans cet article dont des informations sur des méthodes de collecte de données, des techniques d'analyse de données, d'échantillonnage, de signalement et de validation. Chacune de ces techniques est décrite séparément avec une discussion sur l'intérêt qu'aurait un chercheur à opter pour une approche de recherche qualitative plutôt que de suivre un protocole strictement expérimental ou quantitatif. Les approches qualitatives esquissées ici sont l'approche narrative, l'étude de cas, la phénoménologie, la théorie ancrée et l'ethnographie. De plus, une brève discussion des approches qualitatives transpersonnelles est incluse pour introduire le lecteur aux perspectives de la recherche transpersonnelle. Finalement, de multiples exemples sont fournis à partir du champ de la parapsychologie qui viennent mettre en discussion l'application de chacune de ces approches et leur contribution possible à la compréhension du vécu psi et à d'autres études quantitatives futures. Les chercheurs en parapsychologie sont encouragés à développer une meilleure compréhension de la valeur des techniques de recherche qualitative en dehors d'un environnement de laboratoire et à utiliser les résultats des études qualitatives pour structurer et développer de meilleures méthodologies expérimentales au sein du laboratoire.