

An Examination of Qualitative Empirical Studies at the AHRD from 1999-2003: Research Purpose, Research Questions, and Inquiry Literature Cited

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The paper examines the nature of qualitative empirical studies published in the AHRD proceedings from 1999-2003 and discusses findings on research purpose, research question(s), and inquiry literature cited.

Keywords: Qualitative Methodology, Research on Research, Empirical Research Methods

“Research is a *process* having a specific type of outcome. *The outcome of research is new knowledge, obtained through an orderly, investigative process*” (Swanson, 1997 p. 10).

Donovan and Marsick (2000) documented three trends in human resource development (HRD) research: (a) HRD has made strong inroads as an area of professional practice, (b) the field continues to use qualitative and quantitative tools relatively equally, and (c) the number of articles published in the field increased by 50% from 1997 to 1998. The second point that qualitative and quantitative tools are used relatively equally contradicts personal experience as qualitative methods editor for HRDQ (Rocco, 2003). Perceptions within the field of HRD appear to be that (a) qualitative research is not published because qualitative methods are not honored by the editors, reviewers, or the field and (b) qualitative research lacks rigor and is therefore not of publishable quality. The questions driving this study are: Is qualitative research done in an “orderly, investigative” process, with rigor? Do HRD researchers use qualitative and quantitative methods equally? To answer the first questions we asked additional questions:

- What information on design decisions is evident in the methods sections?
- Are the questions what, how, and why adequately addressed in method sections?
- How do researchers that use qualitative methods describe and discuss these methods?
- What inquiry literature is used to inform design decisions?

The next section will present a brief summary of research on research in the field, followed by the research design, findings, and implications.

Summary of Research on Research

As a field that has grown over the past 20 years, research on research becomes more important as a gauge of our future (Williams, Bartlett, Kotrlik, & Higgins, 2002). Four approaches have been taken to estimate HRD’s progress as a field through research on research: comparison to established fields (Williams, 2001), faculty productivity through article publication (Williams et al., 2002), field productivity through publication outlets (Sleezer, Sleezer, & Pace, 1996; Dooley, 2002), and analysis of types and tools of empirical research (Arnold, 1996; Hardy, 1999; van Hoof & Mulder, 1997; Hixon & McClemon, 1999).

Williams (2001) conducted a review of research methods to determine if the field of HRD was following a developmental pattern similar to management science. To determine growth, articles published in *Human Resource Development Quarterly* (HRDQ) from 1995 to 1999 and in the *Academy of Management Journal* from 1975 to 1979 were compared because these periods represent the 20-year mark for the fields of HRD and management, respectively. Articles were searched for “every mentioned statistical and research methodology” (34-3, p. 2). Even though she clearly states an interest in statistical methods only, her analysis notes the use of qualitative methods, but does not explore or honor qualitative methods as important to building the field.

Research publications and outlets have increased with little investigation of the factors associated with increased faculty productivity. On average 2 articles were published over a five year period by 41 of 48 faculty surveyed (Williams et al., 2002). No data were collected on type of article, other types of publication, presentations,

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or research methods used. An understanding exists among researchers that qualitative empirical studies take longer to complete and are more difficult to write up, which could impact productivity. Another way to examine the growth of the field is to examine the publication outlets. Sleezer et al. (1996) found 1290 refereed articles published in 258 distinct journals between 1980 and 1994. Dooley (2002) replicated the Sleezer et al. study for the years 1995 to 2000 finding 540 articles in 149 different journals, an 18% increase. Neither of these studies investigated the type of article or research method used.

Arnold (1996) explored the state of research by analyzing AHRD conference papers for 1994 and 1995 using four types of research: “library research/speculative, descriptive case study or field study, field or laboratory experiment, [and] theoretical model or instrument construction” (p. 818). Field studies were further broken down “into the type of tools” used, quantitative, and qualitative. Forty-one papers used quantitative methods and 16 papers used qualitative methods. Four of these qualitative studies did not specify method and the remaining papers used 10 different methods.

Van Hoof and Mulder (1997) analyzed “the contents and characteristics of research studies” (p. 11) published in the 1996 AHRD proceedings. Papers were divided into four content categories: individual development, career development, organizational development, and field development. Research characteristics included seven variables: research purpose, research strategy, research methods, data format, sampling, analysis procedure, and conclusions. Research methods are data collection tools such as questionnaire or interview while data format included quantitative, qualitative and quantitative, and qualitative. van Hoof and Mulder state that 57.7% of the studies used only qualitative data. This is inconsistent with other statements they make about 31.9% of papers gathering only narrative data “without any quantitative analysis” (p. 16) while 28.5% “quantify their qualitative data by rating them” (p. 16). The definitions of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies used by van Hoof and Mulder are not consistent with definitions accepted by methodologists in qualitative (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) or mixed methods fields (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

Hixon and McClernon (1999) followed but did not replicate the Sleezer et al. (1996) search strategy, finding 66 articles in 23 journals published in 1997. The articles were classified by subject, research method, research participants and publication venue. Research method was divided into four types of research and “two tools (i.e., qualitative and quantitative)” (p. 899) and duplicated Arnold’s (1996) classification scheme. All of the articles and papers were placed in two categories--qualitative or quantitative and ignored the possibility of a category of mixed methods. Twenty-one of the sixty-six articles relied on qualitative tools. The 45 quantitative articles were broken down by method of analysis but not the qualitative articles.

Hardy (1999) examined the methodological appropriateness of papers presented at the 1997 and 1998 AHRD conference. After setting the stage for the inclusion of mixed method studies through his discussion of hybrid designs, his findings are only discussed in terms of the dichotomy of qualitative/quantitative categories instead of the continuum possible when using hybrid designs or mixed methods. For Hardy, the role of qualitative methods is to develop new theory, expand conceptual frameworks, and enhance understanding of social realities while quantitative methods are used to test and generalize theory. Hardy states the ultimate usefulness of hybrid designs is dependent on the comparative relationships of the results, conclusions, and contributions to the field, yet he advocates only the use of multivariate studies to mature the field.

What has been lacking in these studies of research in HRD is a systematic analysis of mixed methods and qualitative empirical studies. The perception of qualitative research not being honored is evident by the uneven treatment given to qualitative studies, if they are included in the data at all in these studies on research.

Research Design

The research team is composed of a faculty member and five graduate students. We set out to examine the nature of qualitative empirical studies over the past five years by searching AHRD proceedings from 1999-2003. The first step was to determine how many articles were qualitative empirical studies, no mixed methods or mixed model designs (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) were included. Of 695 total papers presented in these five years, less than 25% or 173 papers were considered qualitative studies. Titles, abstracts, and methods sections were scanned searching for words such as qualitative study or the specific method used. During the data collection and analysis this number was further reduced to 151 (22%). During the two-step data collection phase papers were read more thoroughly in order find the data to be input into the ACCESS database, read again by the second researcher checking the data, and again by the third researcher who analyzed specific categories.

We met regularly to determine categories, to ensure consistency in search strategies, use of the database, and to discuss other issues as they occurred. Data was collected in these categories: 1) method, 2) rationale for method, 3) research question/purpose/propositions, 4) participants, 5) sample, 6) data collection, 7) data analysis, 8) data

management, 9) integrity measures, and 10) inquiry literature used. Patton (2002) served as our baseline for category definitions and for what should be included in a category. The data collection process occurred in two steps. An original researcher went through a year's worth of qualitative papers inputting the data into the Access database created for this purpose. A second researcher went through the same papers to check the data. The entire group discussed any discrepancies found by the second researcher until agreement was reached. After each step additional papers were eliminated as not being qualitative studies. However, even if the study used mixed methods, it was included if the author stated it was a qualitative study.

The fourth step was to analyze the data using content analysis procedures where, in Patton's, words we attempted "to identify core consistencies and meanings" (p. 453). Two questions were used as a guide: How is qualitative research performed and reported by HRD practitioners and researchers today? To what extent does Patton's (2002) taxonomy of qualitative research methods correspond to methods reported by HRD practitioners and researchers? When the data collected did not fit into Patton's (2002) taxonomies, themes that emerged from the data were used. A primary researcher was responsible for the preliminary analysis of specific categories.

Discussion of Findings

Due to space limitations only findings from the categories research purpose, research question(s), and inquiry literature used will be discussed.

Research Purpose

Different research purposes reflect researchers' choices of theoretical traditions and values and "lead to different ways to conceptualizing problems, different designs, different types of data gathering, and different ways of publicizing and disseminating findings" (Patton, 2002, p. 222). Patton identifies five types of purposes in qualitative research. Basic research aims to understand and explain fundamental issues of a discipline and to generate new theories or test the existing ones. Applied research generates knowledge to help people solve a real-world problem. Summative evaluation "judge[s] overall effectiveness to inform major decisions about whether the program should continue" and formative evaluation "aim[s] to improve programs" (p. 218). Action research addresses problems of a program or organization, without an intention to generalize the knowledge to other contexts. Eighty authors (53%) conducted applied and sixty-six (43.7%) conducted basic research (see Table A). Four studies, less than 3%, identified their purpose as action research (e.g., Bailey & Hahn, 1999; Bierema, 2002). Only Parker and Thomas (2003) describe their research purpose as "qualitative evaluation" which is "both a formative and a summative evaluation" (p. 168).

Table A. *Examination of Research Purpose through Patton's (2002) Typology*

Year	Total			Applied			Evaluation			Action Research	
	Papers	Basic	Percent	Papers	Percent	Papers	Percent	Papers	Percent	Papers	Percent
1999	46	14	30.4	31	67.4	0	0	1	2.2		
2000	25	8	32	17	68	0	0	0	0		
2001	31	17	54.8	12	38.7	0	0	2	6.5		
2002	30	20	66.7	9	30	0	0	1	3.3		
2003	19	7	36.8	11	57.9	1	5.3	0	0		
Total	151	66	43.7	80	53	1	.66	4	2.6		

Since "purpose is the controlling force in research" (Patton, 2002, p. 213), purpose statement becomes "the most important statement in an entire research study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 87). Out of 151 papers, 138 (91.4%) provided a purpose statement (see Table B). Of the remaining thirteen papers, twelve included research questions (e.g., Huhta & Niemi, 2001; Kehrhahn 1999) and one - propositions (Tate-Blake, 2000).

"A good qualitative purpose statement contains important elements of qualitative research, uses research words drawn from literature of that inquiry ..., and employs the procedures of an emerging design based on experiences of individuals in a natural setting" (Creswell, 2003, p. 88). Most authors, 132 (87.4%), provided a clear purpose statement that was easy to identify and understand. For example, Bierema (2002) writes, "The purpose of this research was to study women's gender consciousness development through an action research project with a group of eight women, the majority of who are employed as domestic violence prevention and treatment policy makers and service providers in the Midwest" (paper 7-2). This purpose statement starts with a signaling phrase and includes the phenomena under investigation, research design, the participants, and geographic location.

Table B. *Research Purpose Statement by Year*

Year	Total Papers	Total Purpose	Percent	Clear Purpose	Percent
1999	46	43	93.5	41	89
2000	25	20	80	20	80
2001	31	27	87	27	87
2002	30	30	100	26	86.7
2003	19	18	94.7	18	94.7
Total	151	138	91.4	132	87.4

However, six studies expressed their purpose in other terms. Four authors framed their research purpose as a paper purpose which is sometimes reserved for conceptual pieces rather than empirical studies. For example, Boudreaux, Chermack, Lowe, Wilson, and Holton (2002) state, “the purpose of this paper is to describe the qualitative project and the androgogical process undertaken” and describe the project outcome instead of its purpose –“the creation of a database that would be available for future research and scholarly study” (paper 35-2). Two other authors framed research purpose as a research problem. For example, Bourland (1999) writes, “Research problem was therefore defined to identify how existing international HRD experiences and practices at the ONS compared with best practice in cross-cultural consultancy, and to draw conclusions about the changes needed to those practices and the implications for advancing theories” (p. 697). The purpose statement is a separate element of a study and should not be confused for with a problem statement. According to Creswell (2003), the purpose “builds on a need (the problem) and is refined into specific questions (the research questions)” (Creswell, 2003, p. 88). While the problem statement identifies a gap in knowledge, the purpose statement describes “what needs to be done” to address the gap (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 19).

Research Questions

Research questions serve as another “signpost” of the research plan, follow the purpose statement, and clarify and narrow the focus (Creswell, 2003, p. 105). They “begin to operationalize the conceptual framework”, clarify theoretical assumptions, prioritize issues of interest, focus data collection, help with decisions about sampling and data collection tools, and, hence, “constrain the possible types of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 22). One hundred twenty-nine papers (85.4%) provided research questions. Research questions should “assume two forms: a central question and associated subquestions” (Creswell, 2003, p. 105). Trying to answer too many questions of either form can cause the researcher to “easily lose the forest for the trees and fragment the collection of data ... [making] it harder to see emergent links across different parts of the database and to integrate findings” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25). Out of the 129, only 12 studies (9.3%) followed this division. Ten of these 12 studies used one central question followed by two (e.g., Rocco & Stein, 2000) to eleven (e.g., Kraemer, 2000) subquestions. O’Neil (2001) used two central questions followed by five subquestions, which were associated with both central questions as a set. Only Yoon (2003) formulated 3 central questions each followed by a set of subquestions.

One hundred three studies (79.8%) chose to rely only on central questions (see Table C). Less than 15% of the researchers used one question, 17% used two central questions, one third (29.5%) used three central research questions, and almost 19% used more than three (18.6%).

Fourteen studies (10.9%) used other ways to narrow the purpose. Research questions were grouped by “four areas” (Winterton & Winterton, 2002) and by “four components” of the issue of inquiry (Raspiller, 1999). Four studies provided only examples of research questions. For instance, Ravishankar (1999) writes, “some of the research questions we attempted to answer were the following” (p. 92) and provides half a dozen questions. Though qualitative researchers should not state objectives, goals, or hypotheses (Creswell, 2003), two studies were answering their research questions and testing hypotheses (Sewe, 1999; Walton & Martin, 2000) and two more were answering questions and achieving objectives (Kamau, McLean, & Ardichvili, 1999; O’Neil, 1999). Four other authors included either two different sets of questions in the paper (e.g., Polach, 2001) or a set of questions “to lessen the confusion” in addition to the central question and subquestions (Lien, 2000).

Table C. *The Use of Research Questions*

Year	Research Questions				Central questions and subquestions	Other
	One	Two	Three	More than three		
1999	8	5	11	5	3	9
2000	2	2	7	5	3	2
2001	4	5	6	6	3	2
2002	4	4	7	5	2	1

Table C. *The Use of Research Questions (Con't)*

Year	One	Two	Three	More than three	Central questions and subquestions	Other
2003	1	6	7	3	1	0
Total	19	22	38	24	12	14
Percent	14.7	17	29.5	18.6	9.3	10.9

Implications for the Field Regarding Research Purpose and Research Questions

All researchers provided either a purpose statement or research questions. However, since “the first step in a research process is getting clear about purpose” (Patton, 2002, p. 213), it is what is missing or confusing in the papers that deserves more attention. Twenty-four studies (16%) lacked either the purpose statement or research questions. If some AHRD qualitative researchers approach research without a clear purpose, the possibility exists that this will undermine the credibility of the findings, qualitative research in general, and the Academy, which strives toward a vision of “leading human resource development profession through research” (AHRD, 2005). Our finding that qualitative AHRD researchers prefer conducting applied research over basic supports Chalofsky’s (2004) conclusion that HRD “is still primarily practice-driven” (p. 425). Research and theory building did not have supports for dissemination until fairly recently with the establishment of the Academy, *HRDQ* and *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, so “we have had practitioners’ and consultants’ educated opinions and ideas *cloaked as new theories and/or approaches* driving practice” (p. 426, original italics). Between 1999-2003, the number of qualitative applied research studies exceeded basic research studies only by 14 (10%) which might indicate that HRD researchers are engaging in scholarly research to build a theoretical foundation for the discipline and use the Academy as its dissemination outlet.

Inquiry Literature Cited

To address the research sub-question, “What inquiry literature is used to inform design decisions?” we explored how many and what inquiry literature sources were used in the method sections of the manuscripts. Out of 151 manuscripts, only three quarters (74.2%) cited inquiry literature in the method section (See Table D). Most authors (30%) cited either three or four inquiry literature sources; fewer (23.2%) cited two sources. Two authors (Kupritz, 1999; Sherlock, 2002) used seven sources and one (Kupritz, 2002) used eight, the highest number of inquiry sources cited.

Table D. *Analysis of Inquiry Literature by Number and Year*

Year	Number of papers	Number of inquiry literature sources cited									
		0	%	1	%	2	%	3-4	%	5-8	%
1999	46	11	23.9	3	6.5	8	17.4	18	39	6	13
2000	25	6	24	3	12	9	36	6	24	1	4
2001	31	12	38.7	7	22.6	5	16.1	7	22.6	0	0
2002	30	8	26.7	2	6.6	5	16.6	8	26.7	7	23.3
2003	19	1	5.3	3	15.8	8	42.1	6	31.6	1	5.3
Total	151	38	25.2	18	11.9	35	23.2	45	30	15	10

Six inquiry literature sources were used most frequently. Of 113 authors that cited inquiry literature, 21 (18.6%) used *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), 20 (17.7%) cited Patton’s (1990, 2002) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, and 19 (16.8%) referred to Miles and Huberman’s (1994) *Qualitative Data Analysis*. Twelve percent of authors cited Yin (1994), nine percent - Meriam (1998), and eight percent - Creswell (1998).

Implications for the Field Regarding Inquiry Literature Cited

A high level of scholarship is demonstrated through researchers’ familiarity with research methodology and techniques which allow researchers to ground their research, present sound arguments, and contribute to their disciplines (Hart, 1998). In manuscripts, researchers demonstrate this understanding in the Method section by explaining “what was done, how it was done, and why it was done, and answers to these questions should be grounded in the inquiry literature” (Rocco, 2005, p. 15). Citing sources “whenever possible” to support statements is also a requirement of the *APA Manual* (2001, p. 28), the guiding source for publications in the Academy. Since the AHRD consists primarily of university faculty, the fact that over half of them cited between two and four sources does not come as a surprise. However, the quarter of the papers not grounded in the inquiry literature is alarming.

The amount of inquiry literature tripled between 1984 and 1994 (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Since defects in research design and management are “a major cause for the rejection of manuscripts” (APA, 2001, p. 4), this disregard for inquiry literature undermines the quality of qualitative research and its potential for advancing HRD.

Conclusion

As a field, if we do not concern ourselves with the quality of research design in qualitative empirical studies we decrease the chances of publication of this work. This limits the potential impact the research might have had on the field. For a field concerned with theory development (Lynham, 2000), with practice informing theory and theory informing practice (Jacobs, 1997; Jarvis, 1999), this is disturbing.

The research process includes “the very important final step of *reporting* the results” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 173) which involves being able to write up the research as a conference paper and then manuscript. If qualitative empirical research aims to contribute to a field, it must be presented in a logical and coherent manner that practitioners understand and other researchers can use. In order for this to happen, we must teach our students, novice scholars, and practitioner-researchers how to present their ideas well (Jarvis, 1999) and how to present the research design clearly and concisely (Rocco, 2003). Since “research is central to the development of any field of study” (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 1) when research about practical work based problems goes unpublished, the potential contribution to the field is lost (Jarvis, 1999).

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