

New pathways to analysis through thick description: Historical trauma and emerging qualitative research

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Abstract

Qualitative methods open analytical pathways and present specific challenges, particularly for early career scholars forging a path in a field dominated by quantitative inquiry. However, for many scholars, qualitative methods reflect a particular ontological point of view, which tends toward privileging the experiences of groups that are often marginalized in research. Given this point of view, qualitative methodologies provide an opportunity to reframe the participant's *en vivo description* of their own experience. In so doing, qualitative methods invite scholars to create new *analytical* pathways. This paper highlights the work of social work scholars using qualitative methods to forge new paths in studying emergent phenomena, e.g., Internet gang banging, transgender perspectives on aging, etc. The paper also explores the use of qualitative methods to develop new analytical perspectives on experiences of historic and contemporary trauma related to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and in child welfare settings.

Keywords

Qualitative methods, analytical pathways, thick description, trauma, Tuskegee Syphilis Study, child welfare, marginalized groups

This article explores the complexities and joys of conducting qualitative research from the perspective of an early career scholar. The paper builds on a panel discussion I participated in entitled, “Beyond Description: Moving from Description

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Qualitative methods open analytical pathways and present specific challenges, particularly for early career scholars forging a path in a field dominated by quantitative inquiry. However, for many scholars, qualitative methods reflect a particular ontological point of view, which tends toward privileging the experiences of groups that are often marginalized in research. Marginalization may take the form of omitting the totality of one’s lived experience, overemphasizing experiences of suffering or degradation, or simply presenting one-dimensional accounts of complex social experience. Given this point of view, qualitative methodologies provide an opportunity to reframe the participant’s *en vivo description* of their own experience. In so doing, qualitative methods invite scholars to create new *analytical* pathways. Scholars such as Linda Tuwhai Smith and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva have noted that qualitative approaches represent “decolonizing methodologies” that give voice to groups that are typically silenced (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi, 2008; Smith, 1999).

That said, depending on the scholarly discipline, qualitative methods remain marginally acceptable in the American academy relative to quantitative methods. Qualitative researchers are often challenged to justify their methodological choices in a way that quantitative scholars are rarely required to do. Given that quantitative methods are overwhelmingly privileged in the field, qualitative social work scholars have noted that pursuing an academic career as qualitative researcher presents very real barriers to success (Staller, 2013). However, it is also true that qualitative social science has always had a strong presence in social work, sociology, and anthropology.

Although some quantitative methodologists dismiss qualitative methods for remaining at the level of exploration or description without arriving at analytical conclusions, qualitative scholars are adept at showcasing the strengths of the methodology (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, Padgett, 2008; Staller, 2013). Moreover, as qualitative social work researchers, anthropologists, and sociologists have demonstrated, conducting thorough qualitative studies that arrive at “thick description” is indeed a hefty scholarly task (Geertz, 1994; Gilgun, 2015).

In keeping with Gilgun and other qualitative scholars, I argue that describing a population or phenomenon that is often overlooked is difficult and important work, particularly for qualitative social work researchers. We are often charged with “holding the space” for people whose voice is generally left out of quantitative studies. The phrase “holding the space” echoes the core social work value of enhancing human well-being and paying particular attention to the needs of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty.

The task of “holding the space” is exemplified in the work of a group of scholars whose research includes in-depth description and analysis of emergent phenomena, e.g., use of social media as a platform for gang banging (Patton et al., 2013); transgender and queer perspectives on aging (Fabbre, 2014); and deeply entrenched social phenomena that is not well explored, e.g., race and sex discrimination in

health care settings among Black middle-class women (Sacks, 2013a); long-term impact of stigma among formerly incarcerated mothers (Gunn, 2013); and trauma and substance abuse among child welfare-involved African American mothers (Blakey, 2012).

These scholars, and others, use thick description and interpretive methods as a mechanism through which to arrive at analytical claims. For example, Blakey's (2012) work begins with a description of the addiction histories of women who have lost custody of their children to the child welfare system. Based on the women's richly rendered narratives, Blakey arrives at a theoretically informed analytical conclusion that runs counter to the dominant rational choice paradigm often advanced in social science research. The women's thick descriptions of their life circumstances allow Blakey to develop analytical claims about substance use, relapse, family reunification, and trauma.

In the process of describing their histories of substance abuse, participants divulge trauma histories that have been largely overlooked during their time in the criminal justice and child welfare systems. Through the use of an interpretive method, Blakey's analysis of their stories suggests a theoretically informed, trauma-based interpretation of addiction that runs counter to dominant discourses about "bad or neglectful" drug-addicted mothers. In this manner, qualitative methods are both descriptive and analytical, which builds social work scholarship and practice. Based on these data, Blakey and Hancock (2014) have advocated for more trauma-informed systems of care for formerly incarcerated mothers and their children.

Qualitative methods also provide an opportunity to uncover conceptual and analytical domains that would be impossible in a close-coded survey or other quantitative data collection method. For example, during a focus group about Black middle-class women's race and gender preferences for health care providers, I encountered a woman who steadfastly refused to ever be treated by a non-Black provider even in emergency situations (Sacks, 2013a). When her stance was strongly challenged by other focus group respondents, she disclosed that her great-grandfather was killed as a result of his enrollment in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study.

The US Public Health Service (PHS) began the "Study of Syphilis in the Untreated Negro Male" in 1932. Three hundred ninety-nine (399) African American men and 201 controls, primarily poor sharecroppers in Macon County, Alabama, were enrolled in the study. The men were told they would be treated for syphilis when in fact the purpose of the study was to learn whether syphilis progressed differently in Blacks than Whites. PHS never intended to provide treatment to the study respondents and although penicillin was available by 1943, the men were not treated and hundreds went on to infect their wives and children through congenital exposure (Washington, 2006). The experiment continued for 40 years and ended in 1972. The outcry over the study led to reform of human subjects' protections and the creation of the National Center for Bioethics and Research at Tuskegee University (Reverby, 2001).

Moreover, given the rare opportunity to explore this event with a respondent with personal experience with it, I conducted a follow-up interview with her five years after our first meeting (Sacks, 2015). During the interview, which was designed to allow her to discuss her life experience through time, she provided additional insight to her family's interpretation of the events surrounding her great-grandfather's enrollment in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Although at the time of the focus group in 2010, she stated definitively that her health care preferences were the result of her family's Tuskegee experiment history, upon follow-up, it was clear that the circumstances surrounding his death were vague. The uncertainty surrounding her great-grandfather's death, led to deep feelings of confusion, fear, and resentment. Later in the interview, the respondent recalled that another member of her family, her grandfather, had been permanently disfigured after being denied treatment for severe burns at a White-only hospital in Alabama. Taken together, these events, along with numerous instances of discrimination, compelled the respondent and her family to avoid all encounters with non-Black health care providers.

In spite of the confusion surrounding the circumstances of her great-grandfather's death, the respondent and her family clearly experienced the instances of discrimination as life or death struggles. Importantly, her contemporary refusal to seek health care treatment from White providers was not only related to her great-grandfather's presumed involvement in Tuskegee. Rather, the totality of her experience led her to the conclusion that, for her own safety, she should avoid White health care providers and institutions. She spoke of these events as being traumatic and became visibly emotional when recounting her story and subsequent health care decisions. These data facilitated an analytical perspective through which to explore the relationship between historic and collective trauma on the contemporary well-being of Black women and other minorities. In so doing, the open-ended data collection method facilitated thick description that allowed me to contextualize her race preference in the context of racial discrimination and experimentation.

The brief summaries of qualitative social work scholarship presented throughout exemplify the importance of careful description and cogent interpretation of qualitative data. Qualitative research fills an important gap in the social science literature in that it illuminates the experience of people who are often invisible in quantitative social science research. By holding the space for vulnerable, understudied, and omitted groups, qualitative social work scholars normalize their experiences, which often lead to analytical breakthroughs. In spite of the additional challenges qualitative researchers face in the academy, these new perspectives provide the necessary energy to forge new research paths and practice interventions.

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