

Interpretive Description: A Practical, Rigorous Qualitative Approach for Applied Research

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Abstract

Purpose and goals

What qualitative frameworks allow the pursuit of rich data about practical research questions without requiring researchers to squeeze their study into traditional qualitative frameworks that were developed to create grand theories? This paper introduces interpretive description, a qualitative approach that originated in the field of nursing. It focuses on answering real-world questions in applied disciplines, with rigorous ontological and epistemological underpinnings. The goal of the paper is to familiarize the library research community with this promising approach for practical qualitative research.

Design and methodology

I provide a brief overview of qualitative research and major qualitative traditions originally intended to develop conceptual theories such as grounded theory, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology, and why they are often insufficient for research in applied fields. I then describe the key tenets of interpretive description, originally introduced to the field of nursing by Sally Thorne to address this very issue. I address specific components of interpretive description, including question development, ontology, epistemology, and the use of various data collection and analysis approaches, which are often borrowed from other qualitative traditions with thoughtful justification. I also explain how one study focused on undergraduate students' attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries would look if approached through the lens of each aforementioned traditional qualitative approach, and how the nature of the findings would differ based on each. Finally, I demonstrate how interpretive description provided the right methodological fit to gain practical knowledge in this study while still ensuring rigor. The focus of this paper is on methods, not on the specific findings of the study that is used as an example, although attendees will be provided additional citations to learn more about the results if interested.

Conclusions

Many traditional qualitative traditions require librarians to force a square peg into a round hole when embarking on a practically focused research study. Interpretive description encourages the thoughtful utilization of methods from various qualitative traditions to answer specific research questions, which are posed in a way that allows answers to be resituated within the context of the applied field. In other words, interpretive description results in useful, practical findings for librarianship.

Introduction and background

This paper provides a detailed introduction to interpretive description, a practical, rigorous qualitative approach for applied research that is well-established in nursing, and is also used in other human services fields such as education, public health, and social work. However, it has only been introduced to the Library and Information Science (LIS) field recently in an article I published based on my dissertation about undergraduate students' attitudes on search data privacy in academic libraries.¹ In this paper, I use that study to illustrate the effective use of interpretive description to answer practical, applied questions that are best answered with qualitative data.

When I embarked on my dissertation, I knew in laymen's terms what I wanted to study. I wished to understand what undergraduate students think about libraries maintaining and using (or not maintaining and not using) data about what they access, read, and borrow. In other words, what are their attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries? My interest in this stemmed from libraries' historical commitment to privacy,² which at times results in practices of purging data within our control to maintain user privacy.³ This has some limiting implications for the type of assessment libraries can engage in. While librarians' commitment to privacy is clearly reflected in the literature,⁴ research about student perspectives on privacy and what they search for is sparse.⁵ Ultimately, what I really wanted to ask was:

What do students think about libraries potentially collecting or not collecting data about their use of library materials?

My intent was to make a contribution to the literature that would allow more consideration of student perspectives in setting our privacy practices. This seemed fairly straightforward to me, but of course a simple question asked-and-answered does not pass muster as a rigorous research framework required for a dissertation. As I began searching for the right qualitative approach, I struggled to find one that didn't require me to contort my research questions into something loftier or more grandiose.

Traditional qualitative approaches

Many of the most established qualitative traditions have their roots in disciplines like sociology and anthropology, which are primarily concerned with developing grand theories.⁶ Consequently, these approaches are not entirely suitable for applied disciplinary research. Throughout my doctoral coursework, I explored methodologies such as narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and grounded theory for this study. In each instance, I found myself altering the research questions to fit these approaches, often changing the study's nature in the process.

Narrative inquiry

In order conform to narrative inquiry's objective to "re-story" students' lived and told experiences,⁷ I tried to formulate questions that would enable me to retell students' stories about

search data privacy in academic libraries. Research questions in a narrative inquiry study might have been something along the lines of:

How do students narrate and make meaning of their experiences using library resources, with special consideration of privacy?

While this may have been an interesting study, it would not result in practical answers that would usefully guide practice. I was interested in students' attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries; I was less interested in their collective stories of their experiences around it.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is focused on understanding people's "lived experiences" around a particular phenomenon.⁸ To align with this approach, I rephrased questions to uncover the essence of students' experiences in engaging with library search materials while negotiating actions that might relate to privacy in that context. A phenomenological study might have centered on a research question such as:

What is the essence of students' lived experience when using library resources as it relates to privacy?

While this would be an interesting question, it is not specific enough to elicit students' thoughts, attitudes, and feelings about search data privacy in academic libraries.

Grounded theory

As I considered the possibility of a grounded theory study, I crafted questions that would extract information that could be analyzed to culminate in a comprehensive theory.⁹ Grounded theory questions might include:

What experiences, considerations, or processes play a role in the development of students' attitudes about how/if academic libraries should maintain data about students' search habits?

This phrasing would invite interesting responses, but it puts the emphasis on the wrong part of the question: I was primarily interested in students' attitudes about search data privacy in academic library, and secondarily interested in why they held those attitudes. The phrasing of this question places more importance on the way students arrive at their attitudes than the attitudes themselves.

Ultimately, none of these three traditional qualitative approaches allowed me to understand students' attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries in a way that would significantly contribute to the knowledge base for library practitioners. As Wolcott described, I was "posturing": using certain qualitative approaches to make my study appear credible, rather than providing a meaningful framework for the actual questions I wanted to ask.¹⁰

Practical qualitative approaches

Determined to pursue my study in a way that felt true to my initial research interest, I continued to search for a qualitative method that was both rigorous and practical. In this process, I became familiar with two approaches designed to support research in applied disciplines, both of which were rooted in nursing research and practice.

Basic/fundamental descriptive approach

Sandelowski's work defending a *basic* or *fundamental* descriptive approach to qualitative research felt promising for my study.¹¹ She asserts that there are instances in which basic descriptive information gleaned from qualitative data collection methods can make important contributions to research. She advocates that researchers should not need to resort to "methodological acrobatics"¹² in which they claim use of qualitative research approaches like grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography, and others in order to increase the "epistemological credibility" of their studies.¹³

Sandelowski, a nursing professor, articulates a basic/fundamental descriptive approach. The goal is to "present the facts of the case in everyday language."¹⁴ She describes a basic descriptive qualitative approach as one that functions well in practical or applied environments and remains "data-near" in the analysis and interpretation phase of a study with the intent of offering a comprehensive summary of the data.¹⁵

Returning to my intended topic, research questions developed through the frame of a basic/fundamental descriptive approach might have included:

What are undergraduate students' attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries, and why?

The nature of this question is well-aligned to what I hoped my study would achieve. However, although I initially found the concept of basic/fundamental qualitative description compelling, I discovered that it lacked rigor, particularly in regards to data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings. Part of this is intentional on Sandelowski's part, as she describes a descriptive approach as one that can and should intentionally borrow methods and analytic techniques characteristic of other qualitative approaches, as long as the rationale for doing so is clear and intentional.¹⁶ Even so, Sandelowski's promising work was not robust enough to serve as a comprehensive qualitative approach. Therefore, I deemed it necessary to identify a more thoroughly articulated framework, ideally with a similar objective of enhancing understanding of a phenomenon with the ultimate goal of using the findings of the study in applied practice.

Interpretive description

This led me to Thorne's interpretive description approach, also originating in the field of nursing.¹⁷ Like descriptive qualitative research as described by Sandelowski,¹⁸ interpretive description is heavily focused on applied practice and advocates for intentional and thoughtful utilization of methods and analytic techniques from other established qualitative approaches.¹⁹ However, interpretive description is more defensible than the approach to basic qualitative description as offered by Sandelowski²⁰ due to its more clearly articulated description

of the approach’s epistemological underpinnings, analytic strategies, and emphasis on interpretation of data beyond mere description.

More specifically, interpretive description is a strategy for “excavating, illuminating, articulating, and disseminating the kind of knowledge that disciplines with an application mandate tend to need in order to enact their mandate—whether it be healing, educating, serving, or building something on behalf of society.”²¹ This fits librarianship well. The approach provides an intentional and rigorous framework for asking research questions best answered through qualitative methods, yet does not suggest that the result must be a grand theory. It encourages the thoughtful utilization of methods from different qualitative traditions to answer specific research questions, which are posed so that answers can be resituated within the context of the applied field. Built upon a critical realist ontology,²² interpretive description straddles the spectrum of objectivity and subjectivity, relying on both “factual material and social construction” of participants’ realities.²³ In other words, it creates space for the importance of study participants’ attitudes, thoughts, and experiences about the engagement they have with objective or factual phenomena.

Interpretive description is not a discrete method, but an overall approach. Its purpose is based on three things:

1. “An actual real-world question,
2. An understanding of what we do and don’t know on the basis of all available empirical evidence, and
3. An appreciation for the conceptual and contextual realm within which a target audience is positioned to receive the answer we generate.”²⁴

Interpretive description highlights the need for credible knowledge and stresses the importance of interpreting and identifying meaningful patterns in the data, rather than just describing it. Figure 1 explicates the epistemological underpinnings of interpretive description.

Figure 1: Epistemological underpinnings of interpretive description²⁵

Interpretive description studies:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • are conducted in as naturalistic a context as possible in a manner that is respectful of the comfort and ethical rights of all participants,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly attend to the value of subjective and experiential knowledge as one of the fundamental sources of applied practice insight,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capitalize on human commonalities as well as individual expressions of variance within a shared focus of interest,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect issues that are not bound by time and context, but attend carefully to the time and context within which human expressions are enacted,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge a social “constructed” element to human experience that cannot be meaningfully separated from its essential nature,
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize that, in the world of human experience, “reality” involves multiple constructed realities that may well at times be contradictory, and

- Acknowledge an inseparable interaction between the knower and the known, such that the inquirer and the “object” of that inquiry influence one another in the production of the research outcomes.

Thorne supports an intentionally eclectic approach to utilizing specific methods that are often associated with well-known qualitative approaches,²⁶ particularly phenomenology,²⁷ ethnography,²⁸ and grounded theory²⁹ to the extent that those approaches enable researchers to answer their stated questions. Interpretive description

“...shamelessly encourages borrowing from the full universe of available design techniques as appropriate to the nature of the research question at hand. But instead of forcing an overall design logic that had often proved a very poor fit with the questions applied researchers wanted to ask, it invites researchers to move beyond rule structures imposed by any disciplinary worldviews or standpoints that need not apply, and replace them instead with more relevant and meaningful disciplinary logic.”³⁰

For instance, a social worker studying homeless individuals with mental illness might use ethnographic techniques to gather data. Similarly, an educator aiming to understand what motivates teachers to create effective professional development or incentive programs might use grounded theory methods, such as the constant comparative method, for data collection. In both scenarios, the goal is to develop findings that can be applied practically. Interpretive description encourages researchers to consider various qualitative research design decisions, even combining methods not traditionally paired, to best answer their specific research questions.

For sampling, Thorne encourages purposeful sampling with a particular emphasis on theoretical sampling and maximum variation sampling. She is a proponent of simultaneous collection and analysis of data. Common collection methods for interpretive description studies include: interviewing, observing, focus groups, and review of extant sources/documents. Thematic analysis using an inductive approach is a common form of data analysis. Finally, findings should include a description and interpretation of themes, patterns, and relationships within the data, and also a useful heuristic/insight for how practitioners might consider the topic at hand in applied practice. As previously stated, this need not be as original or abstract as theory; the emphasis is on practicality.³¹

Given the applied nature of librarianship as a profession and the practical nature of my intended study, the robust qualitative framework of interpretive description proved to be the ideal methodological approach.

Structure of my study using interpretive description

Under this method, my research questions were identified as:

1. What are undergraduate students’ attitudes about whether academic libraries should collect and maintain user search data, and why?
2. What are acceptable and unacceptable uses of students’ library search data according to undergraduate students, and why?

3. In what ways do undergraduate student attitudes about search data privacy differ in the context of using academic libraries and commercial search engines such as Google?
4. What do students perceive as the risks and benefits of libraries collecting student search data, and how do these perceptions influence their search behavior?

You may notice that the first question is identical to the one I crafted under Sandelowski's framework of basic/fundamental qualitative description.³² This further speaks to the practical similarities of Sandelowski and Thorne's approaches. Rigor is what ultimately distinguishes the twos, as well as the fact that interpretive description is a more comprehensive methodological lens. After settling on interpretive description to guide my study, I was able to evolve the scope of my study to include three additional research questions as listed above.

To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at a diverse, public, doctoral university in the mid-Atlantic south. The study employed a convenience sampling approach³³ combined with elements of purposeful, theoretical, and maximal variation sampling.³⁴ Fifty-three (53) students expressed interest and completed a screening survey to ensure they had used academic libraries before and to provide demographic information.

Over several months, I scheduled interviews on a rolling basis. I selected twenty-seven (27) students for interviews, considering their individual characteristics and demographic traits to diversify the interview pool, embracing aspects of maximal variation sampling. Consequently, the diversity among study participants surpassed my expectations for a convenience sample. The aim of including a heterogeneous group of students was to enhance the richness of the data and findings.

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously using the constant comparative method.³⁵ Interviews were held in person and audio-recorded, then professionally transcribed. The semi-structured interviews³⁶ were composed of both questions and vignettes.³⁷ The inclusion of vignettes, defined by Finch as "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond,"³⁸ enabled participants to respond to concrete situations in order to elicit more abstract ideas and attitudes.³⁹ Using ATLAS.ti coding software, I used First Cycle and Second Cycle Coding to develop themes.⁴⁰

Although quality and rigor should be expected of all qualitative studies, Thorne emphasizes the special importance of quality imperatives in research in the applied disciplines. She states that

The... researcher who presents qualitative research findings to an audience of professionals in the field understands that, regardless of how carefully the assumptions and limitations are stated, any potentially useable insights deriving from the findings may well find their way into clinical applications. Thus, the quality standard... must therefore be somewhat different than theoretical fields."⁴¹

Accordingly, I upheld appropriately high levels of quality and rigor throughout the study implementation. To do so, I employed strategies provided by Thorne⁴² and Lincoln and Guba,⁴³ both of whom provide evaluative criteria for qualitative studies, and strategies to ensure those

criteria have been met. Thorne's four criteria – epistemological credibility, representative credibility, analytic logic, and interpretive authority – have been developed specifically for the purposes of evaluating interpretive description studies.⁴⁴ Lincoln and Guba's criteria – credibility, authenticity, transferability, and dependability – were developed more generally for an array of qualitative or naturalistic studies, and remain prominent in the literature today.⁴⁵ The combination of these approaches demonstrated the study's rigor.

Conclusion

The interpretive description approach afforded a rigorous method that resulted in highly relevant and practical findings, and the study ultimately made an important contribution to the small body of literature on student attitudes about search data privacy in academic libraries. Interpretive description has tremendous potential to increase the pertinence of qualitative research in librarianship without compromising the rigor of the research being conducted.

Because the purpose of this paper is to elucidate the interpretive description approach, it is beyond scope to share the study's findings here. However, they can be fully explored through several prior publications.⁴⁶

Author Biography

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Laura Gariepy directs James Branch Cabell Library's teaching, research and outreach initiatives for the 28,000 VCU community members on the Monroe Park Campus. She oversees undergraduate and graduate education and outreach; information and research services; interlibrary loan; emergency planning and response; and the physical spaces of the nationally renowned library. At various points in her leadership role, she has also been responsible for assessment, special collections and archives, and creative technologies.

Previously, she held a variety of increasingly responsible positions at VCU Libraries. As Head of Teaching, Learning, and Information 2015-18, she was responsible for the information desk in Cabell Library, instruction for undergraduate information literacy education, liaison relationships with VCU's University College, Honors College, and other units, and related duties. She also served as Head of Teaching & Learning and as an Undergraduate Research Librarian since joining VCU Libraries in 2009.

Her research interests focus on assessment in academic libraries, including understanding use of learning spaces and user perceptions of service quality, in addition to data privacy issues as they relate to assessment. She completed her Ph.D. in Education with a concentration in Research, Assessment, and Evaluation in 2019. She also holds an M.S. in Library Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a B.S. in Sociology from Appalachian State University.

Endnotes

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