Scholarship and Research Based on or Influenced by IQA

As of November 2008

Books

2. Fallvignetten in der Lehrervildungsforschung (Case Studies in Teacher Education Research), a chapter in Kraler C and Schratz, M. Ausbildungsqualitat und Kompetenz im Lehrerberuf (roughly, Training Quality and Authority in the Teaching Profession), Lit Verlag, (Lit Publishing House), Münster (Munich).


Journal Articles


**Dissertations & Theses**

1. Artis, R J. Beliefs About Education that Attract Community College Faculty into Higher Education and Motivate them to Stay. UT Austin, 2000.


10. Carter, A N. Service Learning at the Public Research University. UT Austin, 2005


17. Flores Juares, J B. Promoting Student Success: Students’ Perceptions of the Factors that Influence their Engagement at a Mexican University. UT Austin, 2005.


20. Gehrke, R L. Dynamics Between the Academic Advisor and Student on Academic Probation Which Lead to Academic Success. UT Austin, 2006.


48. Miles, C L. Community College Faculty Pay for Performance: A Case Study. UT Austin, 1997.

49. Moore, F L. Perspectives on the Critical Factors for Student Success in Developmental Education: Instructors and Students Speak. UT Austin, 2004

50. Morris, C A. Strategies for recruitment and retention of Faculty of Color in Community Colleges. UT Austin, 2000.


58. Persson, E K. A Faculty Supervisor Training Program to Assess Faculty Performance: A Community College Case Study. UT Austin, 2002.


64. Stewart, N F. Identity, Competency, and Autonomy of Medical Social Workers in Acute Care Settings. Ut Austin, 2006.


Conference Papers


**Commissioned Research**


**Reviews**


   **Excerpt:** The authors synthesize ideas from grounded theory, path and factor analysis, quality management theory, Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge, and systems theory. A dialectical revision of Guba and Lincoln’s theory is offered, which, combined with systems theory, offers new insights into the meaning of reliability and validity in qualitative research. Unlike many theoretical works, the book develops
the theory into a complete and transparent set of protocols for research design, observation, analysis, and interpretation. The combination of theory and practice suits the book for advanced qualitative research courses across the social sciences, especially those that address epistemology. Professional researchers and evaluators will find this a guide to qualitative analysis.


**Excerpt:** Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) is an approach toward qualitative research that is systematically built upon an iterative, affinity-building process. In their book entitled *Interactive Qualitative Analysis*, Northcutt and McCoy (2004) explain and promote the use of this method, suggesting that it adds rigor not traditionally found in qualitative research. They further argue that IQA positions qualitative research in a theoretical and epistemological space different from the one it usually occupies. The use of an affinity process to group ideas as a foundational element of the research approach is appealing because it provides a clear procedure to follow and can readily structure a complex and potentially disorderly set of concepts of issues.

Northcutt and McCoy have not invented an entirely new research approach. They have developed a systematic process for conducting qualitative studies that draws upon common data collection practices, such as interviews and focus groups. In doing so, they reference established research frameworks such as grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The book provides a comprehensive look at the IQA method from both theoretical and practical points of view. The authors use the first four chapters to establish background knowledge and a theoretical perspective, discussing such topics as logic, epistemology, research paradigms and systems thinking. The subsequent chapters cover data collection, analysis and representation, and interpretation. Clear examples using real cases are shared throughout, walking the reader through the process and making the IQA approach more vivid and tangible.

There are two significant strengths to the IQA method. First, it seems to be participant-oriented. Participants help refine the research questions and the initial focus group generates and then immediately codes their ideas. Subsequent research participants (in focus groups or interviews) continue to generate and categorize ideas using the previous participants’ affinities and codes to guide their thoughts. The issues that are represented in the final report are ideally those that were important to the participants and should not be unduly influenced by the researcher’s pre-determined opinions or biases. Second, IQA provides a clear procedural structure for qualitative researchers to follow. Interactive Qualitative Analysis is a concrete and relatively comprehensible approach in comparison with other less-well specified qualitative approaches.

In closing, this book positions itself as a guide for new researchers with an appropriate tone and level of explanation, but given its departure from conventional qualitative research methods and the rigid systematic procedure presented in IQA it should not be the first or only text a student researcher encounters. The book provides a comprehensive and practical guide to using the Interactive Qualitative Analysis approach as well as solid theoretical grounding for how it fits in the larger conversation or qualitative research approaches. As such, it is a welcome addition to a researcher’s bookshelf.


based on systems theory. This method directs researchers to represent target phenomena as affinities (i.e., the elements of which these phenomena are composed) and the relationships among them. The primary mode of data collection is the focus group, and the primary rationale for using this method is its operationalization of a “general theory of rigor” (p. xxii), which the authors describe as composed of a system specifying the meaning of and the relationships among ontological, epistemological, and ethical aspects of inquiry. Northcutt and McCoy’s overall purpose for promoting this method is to resolve persistent “disjunctures” (p. xxii) pertaining to the purpose, execution, and validity of qualitative research and to offer researchers a “soft landing” from the rarefied atmosphere of philosophy and theory to the “unforgiving ground” of actual research (p. xxiv).

The book contains many visual displays and a CD-ROM to showcase the “interactive” features of the method and the interactive style the authors see as essential to teaching the method. Indeed, the book is itself intended to exemplify an interactive qualitative analysis of interactive qualitative analysis.

This book is a valiant effort to address the practice of qualitative research. It will likely be most useful to researchers conducting various kinds of program evaluations, to those interested in identifying and resolving problems impeding the work of organizations and other groups, and to researchers who see research results as data based and verifiable, treat data as indexes of actual events and experiences, and want research results that can be transformed immediately for use. This is a book for researchers who want qualitative inquiry to be more transparent, more traceable, more codified, and more like quantitative research. The strengths of the book include the illustration of systematic ways of conceiving projects, of projecting sampling frames, and of generating, arranging, and analyzing data. Especially of value is the assistance the book provides in identifying all of the constituencies having a stake in a target event and the relative power relationships among them, and in generating research hypotheses.


**Excerpt:** Interactive Qualitative Analysis by Northcutt and McCoy presents a new qualitative research approach. Before I received this book to review, I was not aware of interactive qualitative analysis (IQA). In fact, to prepare for this review, I conducted a search on the Business Source Premier (EBSCO) database for articles using this research approach, but I did not find this methodological approach cited. However, this may be due to the relative newness of this approach (developed by one of the authors in 1993) and its primary use in the field of education. With at least 26 types of qualitative research (Blank, 2004; Tesch, 1990), there should be room for a qualitative approach that offers an important role for participants during data collection and data analysis processes.

The IQA research methodology is not for every qualitative project, nor does it claim to be. This methodology is built on ideas from systems theory, but this approach also includes aspects of dialectical logic, grounded theory, concept mapping, action research, total quality management, the social construction of reality, and postmodern views of society. The purpose of IQA is to develop a picture of a phenomenon through the lens of a group. The authors describe IQA as a process in which the “researcher’s engagement is highest at the beginning (design), decreases during data collection, is at a relative minimum during analysis (which is largely protocol or rule driven), and increases during the interpretative stage” (p. 292). Key features that I found novel were the use of
focus groups for data collection and direct participant involvement in creating the resulting process model.

At the end of the book (pp. 421-423, chap. 11), I was intrigued by the application of IQA techniques to the analysis of a written text. I could envision utilizing IQA techniques with a group of graduate students who would read the text from an interview. Then, using the IQA approaches discussed in chapters 5 and 6, these students could identify concepts in the text and then construct relationships between these concepts.

As Northcutt and McCoy stated, “IQA is more than just focus groups and interviews; the skills and tools associated with axial and theoretical coding provide one with away of thinking” (p. 421). Overall, Interactive Qualitative Analysis introduces a novel approach to qualitative research.


Is Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA) an adequate method for empirical practical theological research? That question is addressed in this book review. In order to answer that question, I will first give a short summary of the contents of the book and then discuss some basic thoughts of the underlying research philosophy and the presented method itself.

Interactive Quality Research is a new integrative approach to qualitative research. The purpose of the book by Northcutt and McCoy is to provide researchers, teachers and students with a clear and systematic method to describe, analyze and evaluate the meaning of a phenomenon in terms of elements (so called affinities) and their relations. It is a contextualized approach, rooted in systems theory. The focus of the book is the construction, interpretation and comparison of so called mindmaps (representations of the way individuals or groups understand a phenomenon). Chapters 1-4 give a theoretical framework. Chapters 5-6 describe how group processes are used to create a picture of the phenomenological reality for a group. The method of building mindmaps by formulating affinities is introduced step by step. For that purpose a theory of coding is introduced (chapter 5) and situated within a wider epistemological context of the logical operations of deduction and induction. The next chapter describes how to go about creating a set of relationships, as perceived by the group, to exist between affinities. Chapters 7 and 8 describe protocols for conducting and analyzing an IQA interview. In 9 and 10 the issues of description and interpretation are addressed. There is no such thing as pure description; it is always interpretation as well, and all interpretations involve implicit or explicit comparisons. It is because of these implicit or explicit comparisons that the IQA theory encourages the researcher to make formal comparisons between and among individuals and groups, and provides procedures for
doing so. Chapter 11 provides some actual examples of IQA studies to demonstrate the interpretive potential of the methodology. Here we see a variety of disciplines and topics. The book is accompanied by a CD with interactive exercises and IQA tools. The authors are aiming high. It is their goal that, within a decade, IQA systems theory will be as well known and as frequently cited as grounded theory is at present. Where do we find IQA in the battlefield of the ‘Paradigm Wars’? (For a description of that battlefield in Practical Theology see: J. A. van der Ven & H-G. Ziebertz, Paradigmenentwicklung in der Praktischen Theologie, Kampen: Kok 1993.) Northcutt & McCoy state in their first chapter: ‘The understanding of what constitutes good research, or, for that matter, what is research at all, is fundamentally an ideological system composed of the seven elements described in this chapter. These elements are more than just a list; they interact with each other in meaningful ways.’ (p. 18) The mentioned elements are: 1) Knowledge and power are largely dependant. 2) The observer and the observed are interdependent. 3) The object of research in IQA is reality in consciousness (italic CJMB), rather than reality itself. ‘Reality’ is a far too elusive construct for any research study. 4) IQA insists that both deduction and induction are necessary for the investigation of meaning. 5) Decontextualized descriptions are useful and possible as long as they are backed up or grounded by highly contextualized ones, and as long as the process by which the text is decontextualized is public, accessible and accountable. There is a difference between research and storytelling. 6) IQA is favourable to theory. The mindmap of a group or individual is, in fact, a theory: a set of relationships from which hypotheses can be deduced. But it is a theory only with respect to a particular phenomenon. As the word theory could create a roadblock in the discussion with colleagues who are more inclined to positivism, the authors prefer the term representation. 7) The traditional concepts of validity and reliability are still useful ones. The operational definition of internal validity in IQA is the extent to which a System Influence Diagram (mindmap) is consistent with the individual hypotheses comprising it. The external validity is the extent to which mindmaps are constructed by independent samples of the same consistency and on the same phenomenon. The reliability of the method is proved by presenting the same description of the same phenomenon to succeeding cohorts of doctoral candidates for several years. One the great merits of this method is, in my view, that IQA offers a way to avoid the unfruitful polarization of the public discourse on ‘valid research’. The method is only fanatic in fighting the Zealots in both camps. After the ‘anything goes’ thesis of the postmodernists (‘all claims to truth are false’), in opposition to the positivistic thesis (‘truth can be found by a careful and objective analysis of data – truth is evidence”)
based’), the emphasis here lies on systematically executed reflection in a dialectical mode. ‘Truth, by which is simply meant a useful way to think about reality, is a dialectic created by the dynamic interaction of the two components of the paradox.’ (p. 23) The meant paradox suggests that A) there are no universals, principles or metanarratives and B) seemingly disparate phenomena are often discovered to be fundamentally similar when analyzed from a systems point of view, a pattern that suggests there might indeed be underlying principles or metanarratives. In my words, this statement tells us that there is indeed a difference between research and storytelling, but that we do need the ‘stories’ (narrated experiences), and the views and clues of participants who are ‘making up’ a social situation in order to describe, analyze and evaluate a phenomenon in that context, and that we should start the enterprise here. But scientific reflection needs distance and external judgement as well. So the question arises (my question anyway), of how and where in the research process does IQA connect the findings with more generalized or transcending theories and insights. Or am I thinking in a too positivistic (or perhaps a too theological) way already by looking for those connections?

Let us have a closer look at the IQA Research Design to find an answer to that question. Many of us, who are familiar with the specific difficulties of beginning empirical research (or with coaching students to find their way in this landscape), will start by formulating a problem statement, followed by a set of research questions. They argue: If one wants to solve a problem, one must generally know what the problem is. This is a rather positivistic way to start, though it is not an easy job to formulate a solid problem statement and questions, which will lead us to relevant and interesting answers. It will take a lot of study in the first place to know how to develop good questions. Others, who are more ethnographically or oriented, choose not to use that sort of language at all. They describe their research in terms of a voyage. Whereas some travellers are making detailed plans, with all the stops and routes set in advance, they just need a direction to take off. They will see what comes along their route. A qualitative researcher is like a loosely scheduled traveller. He starts with a hunch and a travel kit. With this image, borrowed from Bogdan and Biklen, Northcutt and McCoy sketch an epistemological dialectic. (p. 53-54) IQA offers a synthesis, not a compromise, to both ways of travelling. Their ‘how to do this’ (design a qualitative research) is demonstrated by ‘touring the system’ through comments on several verbatim dialogues between a PhD student and her coach, resulting in several tables and schemes. Another research scheme is followed throughout the book.

An IQA research could start like this: (p. 56-71)
A. ‘So, tell me about your dissertation ideas. You’re in human resources, right?
D. Yes, but more in organizational development. We do a lot of specialized training (…)
A. And you are interested in doing your dissertation research in that area?
D. Yes… maybe… I’m not really sure. (…) I’ve gotten really interested in how people react to being laid off. (…) I noticed that no matter what the situation, some people seem to have more of a sense of efficacy than others. The way people deal with layoffs is simply one example.
A. Give me more examples of efficacy…’
The following discussion is about D’s understanding of the term ‘efficacy’. At the end of that first dialogue, D summarizes: ‘I want to know why some adults weather change better and believe in their ability to learn new skills or requirements when others don’t.’ Her homework is to develop a list of groups that she wants to talk to about this problem. She must order her list in two different ways: first by distance to the problem and second by how much power they have over the phenomenon. She also has to think about issue statements. What single issue does she want the members of each group to talk about? In the second dialogue, A comes back to her ‘problem statement’ by exploring the meaning of the word ‘and’ in it. D says it is ‘plus’ (A and B), but then discovers that she is reading it as a ‘because’. A tells her, that in that case, her study is very easy and has already been done, all by herself. Her statement contains both the question and the answer, what is known in mathematics as a tautology. The dialogue goes on.

The concrete written dialogues show a skillful Socratic way of interviewing. The teacher is teaching his student how to teach him/herself in asking questions and finding answers. The teacher abstains from giving his own ideas. The interview method is exemplary for what the researcher will do with the participants of the groups, once they are selected. ‘The researcher, in effect, participates in a systematic internal dialogue, moving around the hermeneutical circle until he or she is satisfied with the answers to the questions that have been raised.’ (p. 61)

After the groups (constituenties) have been formed, the process of looking for the components of meaning (affinities) in each group will start, as they are coded by the members themselves, in order to build their mindmaps in cooperation with them (step 1). The relationships between the affinities in terms of influences or cause and effect are formulated (step 2, both intrasystematically). This is followed by comparisons between the constituencies who differ either in experiential distance or in power
over the phenomena. All possible comparisons are numbered and the most important selected. It is primarily through the comparison of different constituencies’ mindmaps that the researcher gains insight into the meaning of a phenomenon. Comparisons bring different perspectives to the light and with them the questions that need to be answered. Then the researcher can reflect at a deeper level on the first outcomes. It will be noticed that A is *not* advising his student to go to the library or to her computer and read everything that has been written about job lay-offs and a dozen other topics which came to her mind in this stage. At some point the researcher has to be aware of the current state of research, both theoretical and applied, but not prematurely. The researcher must stand on his or her own feet in the field first.

First question is: Is IQA an adequate method for empirical practical theological research? A second follows: How does one connect IQA transcending (or underlying) theories and insights to the concrete findings of the comparisons? To answer the first question: I do think indeed that IQA, developed in the field of social sciences, offers a very clear and practical method for qualitative research in the field of practical theology.

In practical theological research we want to know what is going on in people’s minds and hearts in certain situations, not only how they *act*. To that end we need qualitative interviews. When I want to research, for example, the beliefs, hopes and despairs of terminal ill patients in a hospital, I could use IQA to make mindmaps of those patients who derive comfort and sustenance from their spiritual sources and those who do not seem to do so (in close distance to the phenomenon, one group with more power than the other – subject to empirical verification). I could also interview people who care for them (family, nurses, doctors, chaplains) about their views and experiences with the spiritual dimension of their care (different positions along the distance line and the power line). When the patients are still able (and willing!) to talk about their situation and feelings, the interviews could (should) have a pastoral quality as such. Comparisons between the affinities of different groups could make people conscious of what is going on, and may be what should be changed. Eventually it could lead to better spiritual or pastoral care. I can see that. To research a practice in a careful way is intervention anyway, and it could result in a change of strategy when it is a goal. I did not found a good enough answer to my second question however. Certainly, IQA tools and skills can be used to analyze written discourse as well; it is a way of thinking. But for theologians the thesis that ‘*truth is a useful way to think about reality*’ is a bit thin. Even if the authors are right in their claim that we can
use IQA as well to explain, simplify, contrast, and synthesize the complex discourses of great philosophers and theologians throughout history, I would like to be shown how to connect in practice (by comparison) systematic theological concepts to, for example, the mindmaps of the people who care for dying patients; or to a small middle class church community, where a nearly burnout pastor is trying to keep the flame of tradition burning.

Lots of books about practical theology are not practical at all. They may offer us great thoughts and reflections on all sorts of theological theories and themes, but the ‘how to do issues’, the practice of practical theological research, are very often not addressed, or only in very abstract ways. I expect this book will be of great help to all researchers and students who want to do empirical practical theological research in a hermeneutical mode. It will keep the researcher with both feet on the ground, and that is where the people are, with their experiences, emotions, thoughts and beliefs.