

The Tenets of Good Qualitative Research
Assignment 3a

Kenneth Kim
Student ID #262276
University of Calgary

Submitted to:
Dr. Dianne Dodsworth
EDER 603.01 L91 – Introduction to Interpretive Inquiry
November 11, 2002

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
<i>1. Knowing the right question or set of questions to ask is just as important as understanding the social setting.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>2. The data gathered must be accurate, transparent, full, and thick allowing it to be reproduced.</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>3. The researcher's philosophical assumptions that guide the research must be apparent.</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>4. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in the research, data should be validated from one or more research procedures.</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>5. An ethical methodological framework must be apparent in the research.</i>	<i>14</i>
Discussion	16
References	17

Most non-believers view qualitative strategies as second class. Just as chiropractors are viewed as “quacks” in their field, qualitative researchers have also been chastised for their methods and strategies. In the field of research, those who follow the qualitative approach are often considered not as objective as those who follow the quantitative research paradigm. Because quantitative research uses numerical data rather than nominal data, there is often little dispute of the hard facts in the final analysis.

Qualitative research has its roots in social science. Bogdan (as cited in Berg, 2001, p.2) remarks on the legacy left by qualitative research in his area of work: “...qualitative research has left its mark conceptually and theoretically on the social sciences.” It is about people, for the people, and made for people. This humanistic approach is more hands on and a great deal messier. A comparison of this can be made between shopping in open-air bazaars where prices are bargained and deals are made methodically. This is where qualitative research falls. The social setting in qualitative research is uncontrolled yet the strategies used can be very “rigorous and systematic” (Berg, 2001, p.7). In contrast, quantitative research is like shopping in an air-conditioned mall where prices are fixed and deals are only had on sale items. Quantitative research usually happens in sterile, controlled environments and the strategies used are time tested and often do not change. Both stances require extreme details, yet both do not tell the same story. One is a search for a generalization, the other a search for meaning.

Qualitative research is often misunderstood. It is not the research method of choice for scholars. This paper will outline the perspective on what makes good qualitative research. To illustrate this, we will draw on five statements that define the

elements that give qualitative research its “relative value” in research (Hoepfl, 1997).

The five statements are:

1. Knowing the right question or set of questions to ask is just as important as understanding the social setting.
2. The data gathered must be full, thick, accurate, and transparent allowing it to be reproduced.
3. The researchers philosophical assumptions that guide the research must be apparent.
4. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in the research, data should be validated from one or more research procedures.
5. An ethical methodological framework must be apparent in the research.

The Statements

1. Knowing the right question or set of questions to ask is just as important as understanding the social setting.

Research usually begins with a question or some questions that need to be answered. Berg (2001, p. 18) calls this the “idea”. However, a good idea does not necessarily translate into good research. The protocol usually calls for establishing clear goals in the design process. Valerie Janesick (as cited in Berg, 2001, p. 28) describes this process as the “choreography that establishes the research dance.” Without a concrete plan to organize and plan this “dance”, problems that appear in the latter stages of the research will be much harder to rectify. A problem with “poorly conceived concepts, wrong questions asked, or inappropriate data collected or data collected from the wrong group of people will result in the project being ruined” (Berg, 2001, p. 28). Once an idea has been conceived from a problem situation that is encountered, the “choreography” lays

out the groundwork for what type of data will be collected. How each qualitative research study is developed depends on the purpose of the study, what type of information will be the most useful, and what information will be most credible (Hoepfl, 1997).

Qualitative research comes in many forms. This includes ethnography, action research, case study, and evaluation, which are often combined and overlapped (McBride et al, n.d.). Spradley (1979) describes ethnography as the work of describing a culture (Berg, 2001, p. 133). A classic example of this would be an anthropologist going deep inside the Amazon to learn about a tribe's view on death. Action research, which is sometimes referred to participatory action research, involves "uncovering information that lead to knowledge that is directly useful for a group of people" (Berg, 2001, p. 178). A common field of work where action research is used is in education, business, and health. Case study involves data gathering on a particular person, social setting, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions (Berg, 2001, p. 225). Case study is used to examine specifics in an individual life or special programming. Evaluation techniques use analysis of documents to examine and assess human behaviour as in archival studies. Biographical research is one example of this specialized form of qualitative research where collected documents are used to examine an individual's life. These documents may include diaries, letters, autobiographies, bibliographies, personal stories, and obituaries. Each of the forms discussed have their own defining methods. However, the unifying element that defines all these methods is the degree of commitment and involvement, which is a strict requirement of all good qualitative research.

Research has four phases. They are the acts of getting in, collecting data, analysing data, and distributing data. Getting in refers to the various techniques and procedures intended to secure access to a setting (Berg, 2001, p.66). The data collection phase requires maintaining the access while collecting the data. Analysis makes sense of the information accessed during the getting in phase. Finally, the distribution of data is the liberatory process that “enlightens and empowers the people” to make changes (Berg, 2001, p179). Maintaining an intimate relationship is the anomaly that differentiates qualitative from quantitative research. Qualitative strategies require the researcher to develop a deeper relationship and understanding with the researched. Although “the research question is generally regarded as the primary guide to the appropriate site or setting selection”, it is how the relationship with the participant that usually determine the depth and breadth of the project (Berg, 2001, p. 29). Hammar (2002) suggests, “Rapport is data, not a hindrance.” This implies that developing trust with the researched will enable better access, which results in a clearer perspective of the researched. The researcher’s hope is to gain the insider’s “emic” / “native’s” (from the linguistic term, phonemic, for the minimal unit of sound) point of view while being the outsider (Hammar, 2002). As clarified earlier, this inherently is very different from the outsider’s “etic” (from the linguistic term, phonetic, the minimal unit of meaning) point of view. A dilemma exists though when a native decides to study his own culture. The researcher has an insider perspective even though he is an undoubtedly an outsider. Scott (1996, p. 145) mentions the sustainability of this type of epistemological position in his book. It states that an observer can’t be outside the box and really understand what is going on inside. The researcher must maintain his neutrality, but at the same time be fully

immersed in the culture in order to get a clear perspective of what is happening in the social setting. The intimacy of this type of relationship greatly reduces the distance between the researchers and subject and results in the collection of more meaningful data.

Qualitative research is an adaptive type of research that when done well provides a greater meaning of the social setting. More importantly, as Hammar (2002) notes is that qualitative research can potentially enable the liberatory process that many believe should underscore all research. Research should be conducted towards a greater understanding not merely for research sake. Action research is an example of the liberatory process. It is a collaborative process that involves stakeholders who are actively engaged in the research. The outcomes are then implemented to their social setting. This model allows for a transfer of skills and knowledge in both directions. This participatory process not only enlightens and empowers the stakeholders to make positive change, it gives everyone say in what is to be done or changed. All good qualitative research should be committed to “creating a positive social change” (Berg, 2001, p. 179). Moreover, “a hallmark of all research that is worth doing should be a deeper understanding of the origin, depth, and meaning, or commitments of such beliefs or behaviours, or of the liberatory power” (Hammar, 2002).

2. *The data gathered must be accurate, transparent, full, and thick allowing it to be reproduced.*

For qualitative research to have an impact on the academic community, it must be accurate. Accuracy means paying attention to small details. Blumer, (as cited in Becker, 1992), argued that if we don't find out from people what meanings they are actually giving we will still talk about those meanings. In that case, we will, out of necessity, invent them, reasoning that the people we are writing about must have meant this or that,

or they would not have done the things they did. Misrepresentation of people's thoughts or actions happens, as the researcher is the "human instrument" for data collection (Hoepfl, 1997). This type of forbidden discourse "talk" is generally frowned upon as it tries to insert or twist the meaning to suggest something other than what apparently happened (McBride et al, n.d.). As human instruments, researchers have their own biases. Good qualitative research give recognition to this bias and fully explains how its involvement in the research. Quantitative research, on the other hand, tries to eliminate the bias entirely.

Since "data needs to be reduced and transformed in order to make it more readily accessible, understandable, and to draw out various themes and patterns", there is an imminent possibility of misinterpretation (Berg, 2001, p.35). Dodsworth (2002) mentions the issue of "openness" as ways of maintaining accuracy. What she prescribes is to refine the accounts of the research in a way that "gives the reader ample opportunities to examine the particulars of the inquiry." For a study to be effective there must be an account of the 'official research project' and the 'other study of that study'. Qualitative research involves social construction of experience. With this in mind, this entire process should be transparent for all readers to see and experience. Without such pleasures, qualitative research would not be as appealing as other types of research. The organization of the study from the idea, to the question, to the setting, to the data collection, the data analysis, and the data presentation must all be accounted for. The use of reflexivity can also "illuminate deeper, richer meanings about personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological aspects of a research question." Such a process allows the researcher to see their own biases and to "make the familiars strange" (Kleinsasser,

2002). Making the familiar strange takes the thought that is put on paper and visibly inspects them. When thinking becomes visible, it can be inspected, reviewed, and held up for consideration (Kleinsasser, 2002).

Hoepfl (1997) states that qualitative research has an interpretive character, aimed at discovering the meaning events have for individuals who experience them and the interpretations of those meanings by the researcher. Research that pays attention to the “idiosyncratic as well as the pervasive” and allows the uniqueness of each case to follow its own course is often held in higher regard. Taking ‘full’ ‘thick’ description of events in the social setting is paramount in getting the views of all sides. The fuller the description the less chance something of value is missed. Some researchers pride themselves when they go to the extreme of reproducing the ‘lived experience’ of the people (Becker, 1992). The inclusion of all details gives a fuller description of the social setting and does not leave room for inventing interpretations of the events. Even the intangibles can be eliminated if we aim for ‘breadth’. This means to find out something about every topic the research touches on. Jackson (as cited in Berg, 2001, p. 3) illustrates this in the description of the classroom odours in an elementary classroom. Everything is included in the accounts. Even the smell is an important detail because it makes up the whole social setting. The researcher can then decide on choosing the relevant details. The details can then be “abstracted from the totality of the details that make it up so that the answers can be found to the question” (Becker, 1992).

3. *The researcher’s philosophical assumptions that guide the research must be apparent.*

The qualitative research process uses mostly inductive analysis. Knowing the underlying assumptions of the researcher is paramount as it determines what the he

considers valid research and why he chose that particular research method. With these assumptions in full view, there are no discrepancies when the data is analysed and the results produced. Chua (as cited in Myers, 1997) suggests there are three types paradigm in qualitative research: positivism, interpretive, and critical theory. Positivist research assumes that “reality is objectively given, and can be described by measurable properties which are independent of the observer and his or her instruments (Myer, 1997). Similar to the quantitative approach, positivists test theories to increase the predictive understanding of the phenomena (Myer, 1997). Interpretive research assumes access to reality is only through social construction of the language, consciousness, and shared meaning (Myer, 1997). Similar to the qualitative approach, interpretive researchers look for the subtle meanings to give a full meaning to the context of the social setting. Critical research assumes that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people (Myer, 1997). Critical theorists believe that people can people can consciously change their social and economic circumstances, but are constrained by social, cultural, and political elements. Because qualitative research can follow any of the three assumptions, qualitative is not always interpretive. It may follow a positivist or a critical perspective depending on the methods used.

“Theoretical sensitivity” as mentioned Hopefl (1997) is an important aspect in understanding the personal quality of the researcher. It distinguishes what subtleties are kept and which filtered out during inductive analysis. Therefore, knowing beforehand what assumptions the researcher has is important in the credibility of the research. Jane Ward-Schofield (as cited in Wainwright, 1997) states, “...at the heart of the qualitative approach is the assumption that a piece of qualitative research is very much influenced by

the researcher's individual attributes and perspectives." There is no reason why a researcher cannot shape reality by asking leading questions that are shaped by assumptions. The result is the researcher gets the answers he is looking for. Qualitative research is not objective, but rather builds a clear detailed picture of the social setting. In the beginnings of the research, the problem must be put into a theoretical framework, which is clear and transparent. Because if a researcher took a positivist case study method approach and drew conclusions that are not indicative of his underlying assumptions, then clearly the researcher has put his own bias into the research and failed to convey finding that are credible.

4. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in the research, data should be validated from one or more research procedures.

Qualitative research is an emergent process. It is important to emphasize that the researcher seeks to observe and interpret the meanings in context (Hoepfl, 1997). The research tends to be framed as open-ended. By allowing this process to gradually happen, qualitative research does not impose its theories upon people (McBride et al, n.d.). Rather the questions related to the idea and the theories that are generated thereafter are developed from the social setting. What the participants do and say shapes the research. It is not forced and what results is a better understanding of question or questions not just generalization of facts and figures. This is why qualitative researchers like to answer the "why questions and are not prepared to simply accept the quantitative answers" (McBride et al, n.d.). This is important because the research has assumptions that might be in contrast to the researched. The onus is on the researcher to give up his beliefs and stay neutral when entering the social setting.

Triangulation is what gives qualitative research its credibility. It is not credible if the data is from one perspective. When three or more data gathering techniques are used to investigate the same phenomenon, there is a mutual confirmation of measures and validation of findings (Berg, 2001, p. 4).

Patton (as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) identifies four types of triangulation:

- 1) methods triangulation
- 2) data triangulation
- 3) triangulation through multiple analysis
- 4) theory triangulation

Denzin (as cited in Berg, 2001, p. 5) gives an outline of these four categories:

- 1) methods triangulation can entail within method triangulation and between method triangulation
- 2) data triangulation has three subtypes:
 - a) time
 - b) space and
 - c) person
 - person analysis has three levels:
 - i. aggregate
 - ii. interactive
 - iii. collectivity
- 3) triangulation through multiple analysis consists of using multiple rather than single observers of the same object
- 4) theory triangulation consists of using multiple rather than simple perspectives in relation to the same set of objects

Using triangulation in the research process allows the researcher to reduce the bias in the data including the researcher's own. With the various technologies that are in use today such as video recording, audio recording, and other indirect means of capturing the social setting, triangulation is the preferred method of limiting bias in qualitative research. Besides reducing the bias, triangulation identifies what values, beliefs, and attitudes and understandings, each person in the group holds in common. These common patterns are helpful in the final data analysis. Vice versa, it can identify the differences in

these patterns. “Pile building” as Wainwright (1997) calls it is used in ethnographic data analysis. It involves taking the field note transcripts and searching for common themes. The data is first “read vertically in chronological order to identify common themes which are then coded” (Wainwright, 1997). The data is then marked up and cut up. The detection of similar or different routines, behaviours, and actions is made easier using this process. The researcher can also see if their values, beliefs, attitudes, and understanding concerning what they do are consistent with what they actually do in practice. The use of pile building to find the common patterns and incorporating triangulation to get to these patterns allows for structural corroboration of the events. This process makes it easier to detect patterns and find the subtle nuances that make up the social setting. On the whole, it gives sense to the story and adds credibility to the data.

The trustworthiness of any type of research also depends on internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

Internal validity describes the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality.

External validity measures the ability to generalize things across different settings.

Reliability refers to the degree a measurement, given repeatedly, stays the same.

Objectivity looks at the degree of bias in a research situation.

Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) restate these in simpler terms as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility can be achieved using triangulation as stated before. Typically this involves setting the perspective of different people in relation with each other in order to find out whether they talk or act about a given object / situation in similar ways (McBride, n.d.). Patton (as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) concurs with this statement when he

suggests “credibility depends less on sample size than on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher.”

Transferability is similar to generalisability. The positivist perspective considers that if it exists then it can be measured and generalized to other situations. It is a perspective that is emphasized in quantitative research. Qualitative research lacks this dimension of ‘transferability’ (Hoepfl, 1997). Using thick description, a multitude of answers to a question will enable research findings to be generalised to other situations. Scholfield (as cited in Wainwright, 1997) explain this "generalisability" as an approach aimed to produce findings that have relevance beyond the immediate context of the study. There is a hidden claim that the behaviour in one study will relate in some ways to behaviours in others even if the explanation is limited in time and space (Schofield, 1993). The use of full, thick description as we know it in the qualitative research paradigm allows such generalisability to exists. When a researcher extracts detailed explanations to a phenomenon and at the same time revealing the social implications that is behind it, this data can then be used in context to other situations. Archer (as cited in Scott et al., 1996, p. 145) explains this in his epistemological position of universal rationality. It emphasizes that results from one study can be applied to other studies and that things can’t be explained under a conceptual rationality. In the course of doing qualitative research, there is a certain stance that a researcher takes. However, the dynamics in the social setting sometimes change what role a researcher takes. This change might be a role reversal where the researcher becomes a participant rather than an observer. Full, thick description allows for the grounding of this information to the literature making the process transparent. This perspective of focusing on the

complexities of the social world gives more meaning to the idiosyncrasies that are displayed. When qualitative research is conducted in this manner, where generalization is apparent and thick description is the norm, then we have good qualitative research.

Dependability has received little attention from qualitative researchers who have instead focused on achieving greater validity with their work (Hoepfl, 1997). Although, higher levels of dependability can be examined by reviewing the process and the product for consistency, Lincoln and Gaba (as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) sums it up by saying “since there can be no validity without reliability thus no credibility without dependability, a demonstration of validity is sufficient to establish dependability.”

Objectivity is another term that differentiates qualitative research from quantitative research. Quantitative research stance relies on being objective. Qualitative research inherently can't be objective. It is by nature a subjective method. After all, the selection of the research topic is typically derived from some researcher-oriented position (Berg, 2001, p. 140). This is perhaps a primary reason why the qualitative orientation lacks respect. “In the world of conventional research, subjectivity leads to results that are both unreliable and invalid” (Hoepfl, 1997). Having a “value neutral position where they are neither imposing their views or taking any stand on any social or political issues” is what qualitative researchers hope to achieve (Berg, 2001, p. 140). Qualitative researchers do this by listening more and talking less and being more reflexive on their thoughts (Berg, 2001, p. 140). Being impartial when conducting qualitative research can be achieved through ‘confirmability’. Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Hoepfl, 1997) explain that the confirmability audit means having a paper trail from the raw data to the analysis notes to the reconstruction and synthesis product to the process notes, to the personal

notes, and finally, to the preliminary developmental information. The transparency of qualitative research is what gives it its objectivity.

5. *An ethical methodological framework must be apparent in the research.*

Ethical concerns are an important element in qualitative research since it involves people. However, the promise of that research holds on collective thinking and changes for the better of society, makes this a daunting task for researchers (Berg, 2001, p. 46). Researchers are often seen as intruders who seek information that is not always public and often personal (McBride, n.d.). Because qualitative researchers are deeply committed and involved in a social setting, it is very important that there is a trusting relationship to begin with before data is collected. The question still exists though, “What is the balance between potential harm and the potential social benefit for all? It is this question that having an ethical methodological framework is so important in qualitative studies. The general principles, which qualitative researchers must follow, are the principle of confidentiality, principle of openness, principle of empowerment, and the principle of freedom. It is the researcher, however, who has to negotiate their way through their research (McBride, n.d.).

The principle of confidentiality requires all names of people and places to remain anonymous unless negotiated or agreed upon (McBride, n.d.). Without this principle in place, it would be difficult to get people to be candid about their remarks without them suffering severe repercussions. The data collected should only be retained as long as it is necessary for the researcher to complete his study. The principle of openness is the underlying principle of all research transaction. Openness was discussed earlier and

involves looking at the process of the process. This means that the research process must be transparent for all to see and to evaluate.

The principle of empowerment requires all subjects to be informed of their right about research that affects them. Good qualitative researchers who use people as research subjects must ask for some type of consent. Researchers have an obligation to inform their subjects to the purpose of the research and the identity of the researcher, duration of the participation, any foreseeable risks or benefits, and assurances that withdrawal from participation are free and voluntary (Smythe, 2000, p. 313). This may be implied / passive consent or informed / active consent. When there is no consent given, it is open for debate on the legitimacy of the research process. Researchers must recognize that informed consent is the result of the process of reaching an agreement to work collaboratively, rather than of simply having a consent form sign. In process consent, informed consent is mutually negotiated process that is ongoing throughout the course of the research rather than something obtained at the onset of the study (Smythe, 2000, p. 313). This is very important, as qualitative research requires a collaborative trusting relationship in order to find and process answers to the social setting. However, free and informed consent may sometimes distort the final data. If deception is to be used, “research participants have the right to receive in a timely fashion appropriate information about the nature, results, and conclusions of the research” (Smythe, 2000, p. 316). The researcher should debrief in such a way to acknowledge the efforts and contributions of the participants as well as providing the option of having the participant’s data removed from the study (Smythe, 2000, p. 316). The principle of

freedom gives all subjects the right to say no to the research being offered. This is a fundamental right that has no negotiation if a subject says no.

Qualitative researchers should have a clear idea of what is ethical and what is unethical. The trust that underlies qualitative research must be apparent in order for reliable data can be taken. Every so often there will be misunderstandings, however, it is the researcher's responsibility to negotiate his way through this. The balance achieved through this ethical methodological framework allows for trust to develop and meaningful data to appear. Qualitative research can't be rushed. It is procedural and very time consuming, but when done properly allows for insightful and rich information of the social setting.

Discussion

This paper has highlighted five statements that outline the tenets of good qualitative research. It is by far not a comprehensive list, but can be generalized to most qualitative research. There will be exceptions to the case. However, this paper will allow those new to qualitative research a better awareness of all the intricacies that is a part and parcel of this research paradigm. The statement below is a synopsis of these tenets.

“Good qualitative research means having a deep understanding of the social setting with assumptions that guide the research in full view. It also means having accurate accounts that focus on the givens as well as the idiosyncratic with the data being triangulated to give different perspectives to the study. Allowing for ethical tools that promote the liberatory process will also reveal better data for the research question or questions posed. All these elements when combined make for good qualitative research.”

References

- Becker, H. S. (1992). *The Epistemology of Qualitative Research. "Qualitative" and "Quantitative"*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Retrieved October 11, 2002 from, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/hbecker/qa.html>
- Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Toronto: Allyn and Bacon.
- Dodsworth, D. (2002). Quoted from course correspondence: Posting # 124, End of Week 3 Message, September 30, 2002. EDER 603.01- L91, Fall 2002, WebCT discussion posting.
- Hammar, L. (2002). *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research*. Retrieved October 11, 2002 from, <http://fp.involved.com/methodsman/Fundamentals%20of%20Q.R.M.htm>
- Hoepfl, M. C. (1997). *Choosing Qualitative Research: A Primer for Technology Education Researchers*, v9 no1, 1-11. Retrieved October 11, 2002, from <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JTE/v9n1/hoepfl.html>
- Kleinsasser, A. M. (2000). *Researchers, Reflexivity, and Good Data: Writing to Unlearn. Theory in Practice*, v39 no3, 155-62.
- McBride, R. and Schostak, J. (n.d.). *What is Qualitative Research?* Retrieved October 11, 2002 from <http://www.uea.ac.uk/care/elu/Issues/Research/Res1Cont.html>
- Myers, M. D. (1997). "Qualitative Research in Information Systems," *MIS Quarterly*, v21 no2, June 1997, 241-242. Retrieved October 11, 2002, from <http://www.auckland.ac.nz/msis/isworld/>.
- Olson, H. (1995). *Quantitative versus Qualitative Research: The Wrong Question*. CAIS/ACSI - Annual Conference for the Canadian Association of Information Science. Retrieved October 11, 2002, from <http://www.ualberta.ca/dept/slis/cais/olson.htm>
- Scott, D. and Usher, R. (1996). *Understanding Educational Research*. New York: Routledge.
- Smythe, W. E. and Murray, M. J. (2000). *Owning the Story: Ethical Considerations in Narrative Research*. *Ethics and Behaviour*, v10 no4, 312-336.
- Wainwright, D. (1997). *Can Sociological Research be Qualitative, Critical, and Valid?* *The Qualitative Report*, v3 no2. Retrieved October 11, 2002, from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-2/wain.html>