

Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Design and Why It Doesn't Work

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Qualitative research methods and analytic procedures are used for solving problems of inquiry in all social science disciplines. Because the results they produce have been subjected to a rather well-entrenched and scathing critique by detractors, they are often approached with caution and treated with contempt by investigators. Most often critics of qualitative research operate from a scientific or positivistic tradition that has idealized investigative models borrowed from the natural sciences. From this perspective, qualitative research is criticized for not being something it never intended to be, and is not given credit for its strengths.

This article is designed first to identify some of the unique characteristics of what has come to be known as qualitative research. A second purpose is to enumerate its areas of weakness and to suggest remedies for use when it doesn't work. Finally, we suggest that the criticisms leveled at qualitative research and analysis can be applied to all research paradigms; the really crucial problems are how to select research methods appropriate to the task at hand and how to implement them well. In short, qualitative research, even ethnography, does work when it is done well, just as does research from any other social science paradigm.

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WHY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS UNWORKABLE

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS TOO SUBJECTIVE

One of the most salient characteristics of qualitative research, especially ethnography, is that the researcher is preeminently the research tool (Wolcott, 1975). This characteristic, however, is the source of some of the most persistent complaints about the use of qualitative research procedures. Because all data are filtered directly through the eyes of the data collector, results are considered to be too intuitive, personal, and individualistic. Qualitative researchers are charged with being unable to avoid mixing personal impressions with descriptive accounts or to expunge their own biases from data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Attempts to close in on the real story tempt qualitative researchers to lose objectivity altogether and "go native." On the other hand, too much objectivity results in an unfriendly detachment that shuts off discourse and impedes data collection (LeCompte & Borman, 1986). Finally, detractors assert that qualitative methods provide no independent check on the researcher's use of ill-defined, idiosyncratic, and unsystematic constructs for selecting, collecting, and aggregating data. In part, this accusation derives from the fact that the researcher is both filter for and interpreter of the data; also, the developmental and recursive nature of the research mandates that the research be exploratory, at least in part, which makes advance specification of precise constructs, variables, and data collection procedures difficult. (See below, "Why Is Qualitative Research Done Despite These Limitations?")

THE SOLUTION

First, personal discipline assists qualitative researchers in avoiding excessive subjectivity. Personal discipline requires recognizing explicitly that observers are also research instruments. Thus qualitative researchers develop an awareness, not always shared in other paradigms, that instrumentation cannot be relied on to expunge bias. Second, qualitative researchers adopt a "disciplined subjectivity" (Erickson, 1973) that requires self-conscious and rigorous examination for bias in each

decision of the research process, each question asked, each relationship, and every interaction. This is an almost psychotherapeutic form of analysis. It requires a constant dialogue with self, the keeping of diaries, and the practice of recursive analysis (see below), which most commonly is applied to field data, rather than to investigator cogitations.

Another procedure is the search for "intersubjective understanding" (Erikson, 1973). In this instance, the researcher embraces and makes explicit the subjective aspects of interaction with study participants, building it into the research design. This produces a search for deeper understandings of subject experiences and more authentic portrayals. In these ways the researcher constantly monitors researcher and participant perspectives on conceptual as well as concrete phenomena.

In addition to the personal discipline exercised in the above techniques, the researcher can also undertake the systematic use of external criticism and critics. Careful qualitative researchers make themselves into external critics by practicing an insider-outsider role (Wax, 1971). They may set aside periods for detachment, stepping outside their involvement with subjects while still in the field, or they may actually take a vacation from the field to regain perspective. These vacations are necessary components of the research design; they facilitate both maintenance of perspective so that one does not go native and the capacity for seeing things as if they once again were new and different. Qualitative researchers also may seek commentary from other researchers, mentors, and colleagues as aid in clarifying concepts, developing and refining questions, and regaining insight into phenomena with which investigators have grown too familiar. They also may seek to work in teams, both in and outside the field.

In contrast with the personal disciplines described above, analytic discipline is more procedural and less idiosyncratic. In the first place, it requires triangulation of both methods for data collection and sources of data (Denzin, 1978). This means that each piece of information gained, or each conclusion reached, must be considered tentative or idiosyncratic until it has been corroborated by information collected by other means or from other sources.

Triangulation involves more than the search for positive confirmation, however. Researchers must also test the information they gather against potential negative instances. Negative or discrepant case analysis was originally formalized by Znaniecki (1934); its use is described by Goetz and LeCompte (1984) as a procedure to refine, broaden, or elaborate a construct in which discrepant cases are found.

Negative cases, by contrast, indicate that a construct or tentative hypothesis is inaccurate. The existence of negative cases mandates the formulation of new concepts that better fit the incoming data. These forms of analysis are best initiated after the phenomenon under study has first been carefully mapped out so that systematic viewpoints or constructs can be formulated.

If executed conscientiously, exercise of personal and analytic discipline prevents qualitative researchers from speaking exclusively from their own subjective perceptions. However, the degree to which they are credible to others in this process depends almost entirely upon the degree to which the above processes are spelled out explicitly and systematically in the research report (LeCompte & Goetz, 1984).

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS TOO VALUE LADEN

The charge that qualitative research is overloaded with value and belief systems is related to the issue of subjectivity described above. Though the former concern addresses the bias inherent in the "instrumentation" or the use of researchers themselves as tools for data collection and analysis, this problem focuses on ways in which biases acquired by all researchers are a particular threat to qualitative researchers.

Critics of qualitative research state that both researchers and subject participants bring to the inquiry process a great deal of value-laden baggage. These impediments include perspectives acquired as a consequence of demographic characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, social status position within the society of origin, marital and family status, and professional training. For example, those who are only children, oldest children, or wealthy children look at the world differently from those from large or poor families and from those persons whose birth order position is last. Schools and their environments are viewed differently by teachers, students, administrators, parents, and those who have no children. These various worldviews inevitably affect the types of questions researchers ask, the selections they make when deciding what to observe in the field, and the interpretations they give to what they see. They also affect the type of data researchers are able to elicit.

Compounding the problem are two issues: First, the relationships qualitative researchers have with subjects and, hence, the data given to them are profoundly and unconsciously patterned by demographic

factors such as those listed above. Thus it is impossible to separate what really is "true" from what subjects felt was appropriate knowledge to give persons of the researcher's status, station in life, and so on.

Second, in assuming particular roles within the research setting, the researcher acquires a third identity and accompanying values and perceptions, one that differs from those held prior to entry into the field as well as from those held by subjects and participants in the study. Given all these factors, it is alleged that qualitative researchers cannot maintain sufficient distance from their subjects, their own roles vis-à-vis subjects, and their own unconscious prejudices to keep a study uncontaminated by value judgments.

THE SOLUTION

At one level, the remedies for value-laden research are the same as those prescribed for subjectivity in any context: honesty and introspection. The tool is the same disciplined subjectivity that facilitates directness about one's own initial values and perspectives as well as those acquired in the field. More concretely, qualitative researchers systematically record their interpretive and analytical comments along with, but distinct from, field notes so that reference points concerning time and place as well as the stimulus for specific conclusions can be retrieved and subjected to testing against possible disconfirming evidence. Qualitative researchers also make use of outside referees among colleagues and other field-workers both directly, in discussions that seek clarification or rebuttal of emerging constructs and interpretation, and indirectly, through use of similar or related research literature to provide a comparative perspective.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS NOT REPLICABLE

This charge questions the credibility and adequacy of research that does not account for internal and external reliability in the same way that controlled experimentation does. The issue really is that qualitative research cannot be replicated exactly; it is found wanting because studies of the same or similar settings done by different researchers have yielded different results. Even when the same researcher executes a project a second time in the same setting, the later results often differ

from the earlier ones. Hence qualitative research lacks both external and internal reliability.

THE SOLUTION

Part of the problem lies in the extent to which ethnographic and qualitative research have purposes that are different from controlled or quasi-controlled experimental studies and hence must address concerns for reliability differently. This is because inherent in the paradigm is naturalism or nonintervention; the qualitative researcher or ethnographer is not permitted to control or manipulate the phenomenon under study. That is the proper province of experimental research. Begging the question on the basis of dissimilarity of intent, however valid, is not a sufficient answer. Rather, the solution lies in careful accounting for those changes in the field site or researcher role that may have generated observed differences in results.

To approximate replication, a second researcher must occupy the same status and role positions vis-à-vis subjects and use the same methods, sources, and conceptual frames as did the first researcher; similarly, a researcher doing a second pass through a researcher site must either not deviate from his or her original approach or, as would be required of an investigator from other paradigms, know clearly and make explicit the differences between the original study and the attempted replication. Differences between sites, or in the same site examined at different times, also must be documented; data should be lodged in their social, cultural, and historical context so that social changes and maturation are taken into consideration.

Finally, qualitative researchers must begin with a clear statement of what questions are under investigation, which data sources were used, and how the site and persons studied were defined. This permits a second researcher to follow the same steps for selection and rejection of data sources as those employed by the initial investigator. Though these steps may in the end be discarded, the changes in procedures can at least be identified and the consequent changes in results noted.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS NOT GENERALIZABLE

Qualitative research stands accused of external invalidity. Research designs that use experimental controls on sources of variance and

probabilistic methods for selecting subject participants are designed to generate results that can be compared legitimately across groups and sites. By contrast, qualitative studies are small scale and time-bound; they represent only themselves. Because their results describe unique phenomena, not classes of phenomena, their conclusions cannot be applied to any group other than the one investigated. Given their idiosyncratic nature, they are said to be of little scientific merit.

THE SOLUTION

Though a few phenomena studied by qualitative researchers are indeed totally unique, most have counterparts or analogues elsewhere. Naturally occurring disasters such as space shuttle explosions and volcanic eruptions provide good examples. They occur infrequently and are a rich source of questions for social scientists. However, because of their comparative rarity, people tend to forget similar previous dramatic failures of technology, such as the crash of the Hindenburg or the sinking of the Titanic or the many volcanic eruptions that have devastated communities over time. To the extent that other events or study sites of groups known to be similar to the one of interest can be found and investigated upon similar dimensions, conclusions from earlier studies can inform and can be applied to later ones. What is critical is the degree to which researchers have a reasonable, logical, and rational basis for claiming that the research sites, populations, or events are comparable and that the populations used and conclusions reached can be translated from one study to another. This requires scrupulous adherence to translatability and comparability. These terms, as defined here, are as important to qualitative researchers as external validity or generalizability is for researchers from other paradigms.

Translatability requires that methods, categories, and characteristics of phenomena and groups be identified so explicitly that comparisons can be made across groups and disciplines with confidence. Comparability requires that standard and nonidiosyncratic terminology be used wherever possible and that the boundaries and characteristics of what is studied be made crystal clear (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). When these canons are followed, qualitative researchers can indeed make generalizations, assuming that they are careful to document the number of studies upon which the generalizations are based, and the manner in which the studies and circumstances differed.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PRODUCES TRIVIAL CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative research is said to be novelistic, entertaining, and journalistic; it makes good reading but is not rigorous. It describes what *is* in accurate and often authentic detail, but does not explain why things occur as they do. In short, qualitative research produces mere atheoretical description, not scientific results.

THE SOLUTION

The charge leveled above can be answered simply by doing good research. In our opinion, simple, flat description that does not create linkages with substantial conceptual and theoretical literature is not good ethnography; neither is research that does not examine the sociohistorical context for explanations of what is going on. The recursive nature (Nelson, 1982) of analysis in qualitative and ethnographic research is designed to help the investigator build constructs and integrate them with existing results from the research literature, to create linkages among the classes of phenomena observed in the research site, to build constructs and integrate them with the existing research literature, and to generate explanations for what has been found. Studies without these characteristics are justifiably open to the criticism leveled above; they are merely the descriptive beginnings of a study, and do not constitute a complete one. They certainly are not demonstrative of the analytic strengths of the paradigm.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH HAS NO VALIDITY

Because qualitative research is subjective, it also is assumed to have little internal validity. Although the descriptive material produced may indeed be an artful presentation, there is no way to be certain that what is portrayed is anything more than a researcher's etic imposition of meanings and constructs upon a setting rather than an authentic representation of the thoughts and beliefs of the people under study. At issue is whether the subjects themselves would agree with the reality depicted by the investigator.

Qualitative researchers, particularly anthropologists who must use interpreters because they work among people who speak languages

different from their own, are vulnerable to charges that they have produced biased presentations of "their" people. In part this has been attributed to their own cultural and conceptual blinders; in part it has been a consequence of their lack of facility in the language. If not expeditiously challenged by subsequent investigators, researchers may report their misunderstanding of words and constructs in the native language as fact, with the result that these errors become part of the general theoretical and substantive knowledge base of the discipline.

THE SOLUTION

Qualitative research is provided a remedy to the validity problem in the careful distinction made between etic, or researcher-imposed, and emic, or subject-generated, meanings. Careful qualitative researchers engage in systematic and comprehensive elicitation of participant constructs, cross-checking them with those held by the researchers. This not only provides a more valid representation of the entire participant worldview, but serves as a cross-check on the tendency for researchers to impose their constructs upon the field. Just as historians assess the honesty and accuracy of the primary sources they use, so also does the use and presentation of negative and discrepant data in an ethnography or qualitative study permit qualitative researchers to check the biases of all involved in the study, including their own.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH DOES NOT PROVE ANYTHING

Because it is descriptive and relies upon the intensive exploration of a few cases, qualitative studies are useless in the search for truth; they do not test hypotheses or verify theory, and hence they cannot further the search for verified knowledge.

THE SOLUTION:

Though qualitative research is more generally recognized for its strengths in generating theories and hypotheses that are well grounded in data, it also can be used to test ideas and to establish relationships (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The distinction between the experimental and nonexperimental paradigms is that the ideas and relationships tested in

qualitative investigations can be only those that occur naturally, not those that derive from controlled or experimental manipulations. Ethnology, for example, uses comparative analysis to establish whether ideas or relationships considered valid in one setting obtain in another; qualitative analysis can also generate possible explanations and separate them from probable ones, establish time order and correlation of constructs (Denzin, 1978), and eliminate rival hypotheses. This is accomplished by procedures such as sequential sampling (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and the temporally oriented plausibility analysis that Scriven (1974) calls *modus operandi*.

THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS NOT EMPIRICAL

Qualitative observations lack exactness and precision because they are not recorded in quantified amounts that can be analyzed mathematically.

THE SOLUTION

This criticism derives more from a narrow and erroneous equation of the term *empirical* with quantification, rather than with any real defect in the qualitative paradigm itself. Empiricism relies upon observation of and experimentation with data that can be accessed by means of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste and then recorded in sensory terms that allow others to reconstruct the original observation. Although qualitative designs rarely are experimental, they are preeminently observational, and they may even involve extensive use of quantitative data. Many qualitative researchers *do* count, but only after they are sure that what they are counting is an authentic representation of the range and kinds of phenomena observed.

Because observation and experiences, especially those based on sensory perceptions, are at the heart of empiricism, qualitative studies can be even more "empirical" than quantitative studies because the data are closer to the objects or phenomena observed. By contrast, quantitative data are often abstracted from description and direct sensory experience to create categories amenable to mathematical analysis. These categories lose validity to the extent that their fit with the data upon which they are based is loose.

**THE CHARGE: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IS
NEITHER RIGOROUS NOR SYSTEMATIC,
HENCE IT IS UNSCIENTIFIC**

Qualitative research is criticized for having no hard-and-fast rules of procedure; design and method for data collection and analysis are not specified in advance, and variables do not appear to be either measurable or defined in operational terms. In addition, provisions are not made to control possible sources of error, and the entire process is vague, sloppy, and unsystematic.

THE SOLUTION

Some of the above criticisms are justified in the case of studies in which the investigators have simply assumed that the reader or reviewers understood the nature of qualitative research and did not specify with any precision what they did, how they did it, who was involved, where, and for what length of time. Some anthropologists eschew methodology altogether, concentrating on the intuitive and artistic aspects of the product, rather than its scientific merit (Evans-Pritchard, 1962). Both approaches may produce good work, but if they lack scientific documentation, reviewers from other paradigms may find it difficult to judge the products fairly. We recommend that qualitative researchers pay heed to the different disciplinary audiences they may reach and address them with a precision they can understand.

Further reports of competently done qualitative studies focus upon the flexible, evolutionary, and recursive nature of the investigation; the emphasis of the paradigm is upon remaining sensitive to the data and to input from the field. When initial questions of procedures appear to clash with incoming information, the paradigm permits researchers to abandon unworkable lines of inquiry and reformulate new ones that have a better fit. The resulting nested working hypotheses help guide a course of inquiry that leads toward results that closely adhere to the phenomena and have great authenticity. Rather than simply being an ill-thought-through ad hoc operation, the looseness that characterizes qualitative research is one of its defining features and greatest strengths. It permits the researcher to correct mistakes.

**WHY IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
DONE DESPITE
THESE LIMITATIONS?**

**WHEN WELL DONE,
IT IS HOLOGEISTIC**

Qualitative research is satisfying to its practitioners because, when well done, it tells the whole story with all of its variations, including patterns documented in previous related research literature. Thus it integrates empirical data with what Merton (1967) calls first- and second-level constructs and multiple levels of theory. Qualitative research begins at the item level of analysis, defining and describing objects and phenomena in the world. It subsequently moves to the pattern level, grouping items and linkages among them (LeCompte, 1986). It then examines concrete items as well as the patterns they make for their meanings and how these meanings are connected to one another.

The final step involves integration with the substantive and formal theory; although individual qualitative studies probably never lead to grand theory, they certainly generate and are supported by middle-range theory (Merton, 1967) and provide documentation for broader-scaled explanations of human behavior (see Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, on levels of theory). The continuum starts with item-level analysis, whereby phenomena are observed, and consequently proceeds by transforming those observations into data by making them into empirical statements. These statements usually are phrased in emic terms expressing the meanings given to phenomena by participants. Empirical statements then form the basis for generation of first-level constructs, or pigeonholes, into which various similar items or phenomena can be placed. For example, anthropologists spend a great deal of time asking the question, "What is _____ an example of?" A transformation then must be made from the particularistic emic construction to more general or etic terms. The questions then are, "To which larger group does this emic category belong? Of which larger group is it an example?" This process permits the development of second-level constructs as well as substantive and formal theory.

Qualitative research, then, is conceptually hologeistic, or whole-spirited. This is distinguished from contextual holism, in that it goes

beyond mere location of a research project within its physical, cultural, and historical setting. Hologeistic research requires as well that the perspectives of all involved in the project be integrated, and that results be generated from a thoroughgoing exercise of an entire continuum of data and theoretical analysis.

WHEN WELL DONE, IT IS RECURSIVE

The logic of recursivity means that the procedures can be repeated indefinitely or until a specified condition is met; in research this means that designs are developmental or emergent. With its sequential and developmental nature, qualitative research is more emotionally and intellectually satisfying to the cognitive style of some researchers than it is to others. It operates narratively from the bottom up rather than deductively from the top down. Each investigatory, analytical, and conceptual decision is contingent both on those that precede and those that follow. For example, though a research question or problem always is formulated at the beginning of the study (even if it is as general as "What's going on here?"), that initial question is reviewed during each succeeding activity to assure that the data sources obtained fit it. Where mismatches are encountered, the problem may be reformulated, selection strategies can be reevaluated and changed, and data collection procedures may be reassessed and modified.

Hence every activity includes a complete review of the entire process. Each step taken by the researcher requires a systematic cyclic pattern of thinking from inductive to deductive and back to inductive reasoning, allowing the researcher to integrate serendipitous or unexpected findings into the total study, rather than relegating them to the status of unwanted inference, mere addenda, or post hoc explanations.

WHEN WELL DONE, IT IS BASED UPON SELF-CONSCIOUS, NONMECHANIZED THINKING PROCESSES

Qualitative researchers really operate in what conceptually is a multivariate framework. However, whereas statisticians use mathematics—and the assistance of machines such as computers—to manipulate numbers (which are really quantifications of abstractions from concrete

items or constructs), as we have argued previously, qualitative researchers manipulate intellectually or even physically the items and constructs themselves. Thus, at their best, statistical procedures use tools of mathematics to establish relationships and linkages among constructs across settings and groups. By contrast, qualitative researchers use the tools of logic to establish the same relationships within a given setting. The closeness to concrete data is appealing to those who engage in qualitative research, especially because the closeness of constructs to empirical reality can readily be verified.

At some level, all researchers engage in similar cognitive processes; they compare units or items, contrast them, aggregate, clump and group them, linking, sequencing, dividing and subdividing, asking "as if" questions and speculating. However, qualitative researchers approach the issue differently from quantifiers. To use the concepts of factor analysis as an example, quantitative researchers figure out which items go together to constitute a factor after statistical procedures group them; the factor then is named based on the characteristics of the items that "load" together. By contrast, in qualitative research items are grouped together as a factor or attribute only after their composition and constituent parts are known. This procedure increases the validity of the analysis and its subsequent results; the "hands-on" nature of the work is intrinsically satisfying to many researchers.

WHEN WELL DONE, IT IS PERSONALLY AND EMOTIONALLY SATISFYING TO PRACTITIONERS

We feel that good qualitative researchers generally are people oriented; the direct involvement with key informants and other participants in the research site constitutes one of the most important allures of the paradigm (LeCompte & Borman, 1986). Researchers find it important to be certain that their work really speaks with the voice of "their people," and feel that this is facilitated more adequately by qualitative research methods than by any other. In this way, the politics of qualitative research is fundamentally democratic or even populist; the meaning of the research is determined at the grass-roots level and is not tyrannically imposed by an all-knowing investigator before the "facts" have been gathered.

**SUMMARY:
WHY ALL RESEARCH DESIGNS
SHARE THE SAME PROBLEM**

Although qualitative researchers may address their design problems in ways different from those of investigators using different paradigms (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), the criticisms described in this article can just as legitimately be leveled at all other forms of research. Criticisms of qualitative research tend not to examine inquiry in a general scientific context; rather, critics have assumed that only one method of inquiry or design—usually an approximation of experimental design—is compatible with a science characterized by systematization, logic, and rationality.

Science is, however, a series of ways to look at and explain the world; it involves a method for identifying a problem, gathering data relevant to that problem, formulating hypotheses from the data, and testing the hypotheses empirically (Random House, 1973). As we have pointed out, different kinds of problems mandate different types of data and different approaches to development and testing of hypotheses. The relevance of specific data may change over time and the adequacy of hypotheses can be tested in a variety of ways, even if not experimentally.

Not only are research questions not immutable, but science is an evolving practice itself. What science is depends upon prevailing metatheories. All methods of science and empirical inquiry yield approximations to the truth as it can be known at the time; all inquiry is limited by the intractability of the real world and the current accessibility of its data. For example, we no longer call the energy source of fire "phlogiston" because we now know something of molecular structure and its ability to recombine into new substances. However, the composition of black holes and quarks remains inaccessible given current technologies. In fact, given the limitations of technology, the names themselves are merely mental representations rather than items that have been verified empirically.

Thus all research designs and methods are limited. Different designs are subject to different limitations, and each approach has particular weaknesses; these might be resolved by a different methodology. However, adoption of a different design makes one prey to still other constraints. In summary, the sine qua non is repeatability. Could a researcher having access to the same or similar site repeat, if not

replicate, a study by someone else using only the information given as to how it was done? If the answer is yes, then the researcher needs to return to the beginning of this article and ask if each of the criticisms leveled at qualitative research can be addressed through the design for replication he or she is about to initiate. If the answer is no, then the original study was not done (or described) with sufficient precision for a reviewer to state with confidence that "it worked."

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