Qualitative Research Design:
Selected Articles from *Research Design Review* Published in 2013

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Research Design Review – www.researchdesignreview.com – is an online blog that was first published in November 2009. RDR currently includes over 90 posts concerning quantitative and qualitative research design issues. This paper presents a selection of 13 articles that were published in 2013 devoted to qualitative research design. The goal of this collection, as well as all of the qualitative articles in RDR, is to instill greater awareness of the factors that impact the outcomes of our qualitative research and foster the idea that research designs built around quality standards lead to more credible, analyzable, transparent, and, ultimately, more useful qualitative research. For instance, articles in the 2013 collection consider the importance of group composition and interaction in focus group research, analytical sensibilities and deception in ethnography, the complex research environment of multi-method approaches such as case study and narrative research, and how quality design extends to the writing of the research proposal and final report document.

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Unilever's Qualitative Accreditation Program & Misdirected Quest for "Fresh Ideas"

January 26, 2013

Many researchers have discussed Unilever's accreditation program for qualitative research. Among

others, the Market Research Society, ESOMAR's *Research World*, and Kathryn Korostoff (*Research Rockstar*) have all outlined what led up to this program, the objectives of the program, and the accreditation process. In a nutshell, Unilever assessed the outcomes of their many qualitative studies around the globe and determined that the qualitative researchers Unilever has employed to conduct their qual studies have generally failed in providing management with a sufficient caliber of new ideas and insights that serve to move the company forward.

Manish Makhijani, a consumer insights director at Unilever, stated in an interview discussing the program that one of his top concerns with their qualitative research is the inconsistency in "the quality of insights and debriefs" among their qualitative researchers, emphasizing that "what matters in qual more than anything else is the quality of thinking that you put on the table." And, indeed, Makhijani brought home this point at the November 2012 ESOMAR conference when he presented the notion that "good" qualitative research is derived from "good thinkers," i.e., qualitative researchers that possess these attributes:

- Are strategic thinkers
- Have deep foundation of skills
- Have empathy with the wider Unilever context
- Are conscientious
- Have fresh ideas and thoughts

Who can argue with "good thinkers"? Something we all aspire to be and think a lot about (hmm, a pun). But why is the emphasis here on thinking associated with "fresh" and "strategic" interpretations of qualitative findings and not on how we got to those findings in the first place? Not unlike quantitative researchers who 'lie with statistics', how are we to believe – i.e., what use is – the information delivered by qualitative researchers if all their "fresh ideas" are gleaned from a qualitative research design that is not credible, analyzable, or transparent? The ultimate usefulness of our research outcomes does not hinge on the researcher's "empathy" with the corporate context or even their "deep foundation of skills" (although the meaning of this is not clear) but with the researcher's professional capability to design a qualitative study that minimizes coverage and measurement error (credibility), fully processes and verifies the data, e.g., by way of triangulation and deviant case analysis (analyzability), and presents deliverables that are 'thick' with descriptions and explanations that account for the research steps and the nuances experienced along the way (transparency).

So, thinking is good but only to the extent that it begins at the beginning with the research objectives in conjunction with a sound, quality-constructed research design. By emphasizing design, Makhijani might actually gain a new understanding about his issue of researcher

inconsistency; specifically, why there is a "lack of consistency even when you are using the same agency or similar researchers over a period of time." Is this inconsistency a function of where the researcher falls on the scale of good thinkers or the integrity of the design that produced the outcomes that they are thinking about? Good question.

Focus Groups: A Not-So-Plain Vanilla Choice in Research

February 20, 2013

Focus groups are ubiquitous to the point that, for some, they have become the plain vanilla choice in our ever-eclectic assortment of flavors in research methods. Yet, there are many (many) design considerations that complicate focus group research while directly impacting the credibility, analyzability, and, ultimately, usefulness of the outcomes. One such consideration is discussed here.

Fundamental to the design of a focus group study is group composition. More specifically, it must be determined the degree of homogeneity or heterogeneity the researcher wants represented by the group participants. There is any number of questions the researcher needs to contemplate, such as the participants':

- Age range and/or stage of life.
- Race.
- Ethnicity.
- Income or socioeconomic level.
- Level of education.
- Profession or job (including, job title).
- Community of residence.
- Group or organization association.
- Involvement, experience, or knowledge with the research topic, e.g., product usage activity, purchase behavior, level of expertise using new technology.

Whether or not – or the degree to which – group participants should be homogeneous in some or all characteristics has been at the center of debate for some years. On the one hand, Grønkjaer, et al. (2011) claim that, "homogeneity in focus group construction is considered essential for group interaction and dynamics" and, in the same vein, Julius Sim has found in his health research that, "the more homogeneous the membership of the group, in terms of social background, level of education, knowledge, and experience, the more confident individual group members are likely to be in voicing their views." Even among strangers, there is a certain amount of comfort and safety in the group environment when the participants share key demographic characteristics and relevant experience. A problem arises, however, when this comfortable, safe environment breeds a single-mindedness (or "groupthink") that, without the tactics of a skillful moderator, can stifle divergent thinking and result in erroneous, one-sided interpretations of the findings. Heterogeneity of group participants (e.g., including product users and nonusers in the same focus group) potentially heads off these problems by stimulating different points of view and a depth of understanding that comes from listening to participants "defend" their way of thinking (e.g., product preferences). In addition to a heightened level of diversity, heterogeneous groups may also be a very pragmatic choice for the researcher who is working with limited time and financial resources, or whose target population for the research is confined to a very specific group (e.g., nurses working at a community hospital).

The answer to the question of whether group participants should be homogeneous or heterogeneous is "it depends." As a general rule, group participants should represent similar experiences with or

knowledge of the research topic (e.g., experience using the Web to diagnose a health problem, weekly consumption of skim milk), but the need for "sameness" among participants on other parameters can fluctuate depending on the circumstance. For example, homogeneity of age can be particularly important in non-Western countries where younger people may believe it is disrespectful to offer comments that differ from those stated by their elders. Homogeneous groups are also typically important when investigating sensitive topics, such as drug use among teenagers, when a more mixed group of participants may not only choke the discussion but lead to a struggle for control among participants. Homogeneity of gender, on the other hand, may or may not be important to the success (usefulness) of a focus group study. To illustrate: A company conducting employee focus group research to explore employees' attitudes toward recent shifts in management would conduct separate groups with men and women in order to discover how the underlying emotional response to new management differs between male and female employees. In contrast, a focus group study among customers of the local electric utility company might benefit from including both men and women in the discussion where the varied reactions to the company's bill inserts would serve to stimulate thinking and enrich the research findings.

Group composition is just one consideration when designing a focus group study. There are many others. Focus group research is anything but vanilla.

Accounting for Interactions in Focus Group Research

February 27, 2013

The RDR post on February 20, 2013 talked about focus group research and how it is anything but a "plain vanilla" research method in terms of design considerations. To illustrate, the post discussed the issue of group composition; specifically, the "homogeneity or heterogeneity the researcher wants represented by the group participants." Another important design consideration in face-to-face group discussions centers on the social context and especially the impact that participants' interactions have on the discussion and, consequently, the research outcomes. This is a pretty obvious facet of the focus group method yet, surprisingly, it is largely ignored in the analysis and reporting of group research. Researchers and non-researchers alike complain about the disruptive effect of "dominators" (outspoken group participants who assert their opinions without regard to others), the refusal of "passive" participants to speak their minds, and/or participants talking over each other (making it impossible to hear/follow the discussion) but focus group reports typically fail to discuss these interactions and the role they played in the final analysis.

The good news is that some researchers have given extensive thought to the interaction effect in focus group research and have promoted the idea that this effect needs to be a considered element in the study design. One example is Lehoux, Poland, and Daudelin (2006) who have proposed a "template" by which qualitative researchers can think about, not only how group interaction impacts the group *process* but also, how participants' interaction dictates the learning or *knowledge* the researcher takes away from the discussion. The Lehoux, et al. template consists of specific questions the researcher should address during the analysis phase. For instance, group-process questions include "What types of interactions occur among participants?", "Which participants dominate the discussion?", and "How does this affect the contribution of other participants?" The knowledge-content questions ask things like "What do dominant and passive positions reveal about the topic at hand?" and "What types of knowledge claims are endorsed and/or challenged by participants?"

The credibility and ultimate usefulness of our focus group research depends on a thorough and honest appreciation for what goes on in the field. The analysis *and reporting* of the "interactional events" that guided the discussions in our group research is the obligation of all researchers. Otherwise, what *really* went on in our discussions is some kind of dirty little secret that leaves the users of our research – and the researchers themselves – blinded to the true outcomes. Like a kaleidoscope, our understanding of what we "see" from our focus group research depends on how we account for the interactions taking place, and how each dominant and passive piece plays a role in creating the final effect.

The Importance of Analytical Sensibilities to Observation in Ethnography

March 31, 2013

Ethnography is a multi-method approach in qualitative research with observation at its core. Prolonged onsite observations in the participants' natural material world are what make ethnography a unique and important research approach. Needless to say, the observer plays a central role in the success of an ethnographic study and there are few more important skills for the observer than those associated with the concept of analytical sensibility. It is the observer's skills in sensibilities that can compensate for weaknesses in other aspects of the study design, such as the unavoidable pairing of an older male observer with a group of school-age girls. The observer's analytical sensibilities include the capacity to be aware of and to reflect on his or her surroundings, the actions of the participants, and how the observer may be influencing the outcomes from the observation. This sensibility is analytical in nature because the focus is on the observer's ability to apply analytical skills while in the field that deepen the researcher's understanding of the culture and events from the participants' point of view.

The facet of sensibility that is imperative among all ethnographic observers is – what Stacey and Eckert called – "dual perspective" or the ability to derive meaning from participants' activities (as well as the study environment) by internalizing the viewpoint of the research participants while maintaining an "outsider's" objectivity. In this way, the observer is mentally placing him or herself among the participants while at the same time looking out to the connections that give meaning to the group. A dual perspective demands that observers have the ability to actually put themselves into the "shoes" of unfamiliar cultures and social groups, sensing and recording events from the participants' vantage point while also reflecting on its meaning as well as the observer's own values and possible biases. This ability distinguishes the untrained observer from the ethnographer.

The observer's job is made particularly difficult because a dual way of thinking is only one of the analytical sensibilities required from an ethnographic observer. An observer's sensibility skills also include the ability to:

- Notice and record participants' body movements (e.g., posture, gestures, eye contact), language and word choices, seating or standing positions, relative interaction with others, as well as the physical setting (including a map of the physical space and the participants positions within it).

- Gain participants trust by managing assumptions and expectations (e.g., patients in a drug detox facility might alter their behavior under the assumption that the observer is an undercover agent, or students-in-training may believe that the observer is there to offer expert advice rather than just observe).

- Focus attention on what is happening *now* in the study environment rather than trying to anticipate what will happen next. That is, being in the moment.

- Reflect back on observations during the field period, construct hypotheses or begin to identify patterns, and investigate nascent theories with participants by way of IDIs and/or activities.

- Maintain naivety when immersed in the role of a complete participant (e.g., an observer who is an experienced seaman needs to make a conscious effort to consider what he or she knows about the subject matter when studying the daily lives of fishermen, and continually reflect on the degree to which this know-how may be biasing the observer's ability to conduct the observation from the participants' point of view).

To simply observe a social group, an individual, an act, or an event (on- or off-line) is not research. Observation requires the analytical sensibilities of a trained ethnographer who can bring back from the field credible, analyzable, and ultimately useful data that takes the researcher to the next step.

Maintaining the Life of Qualitative Research: Why Reporting Research Design Matters

April 15, 2013

"Keep it simple," "keep it short," and "make it fast." These are the words that many qualitative researchers live by as they sit down to produce the final written report for their clients. The prevailing sense among some, particularly in the marketing research field, is that their all-too-busy clients don't have the time, inclination, or research backgrounds to read lengthy reports detailing nuanced findings and method. Instead, clients want a brief summary of outcomes that are actionable in the short term. It is no wonder that PowerPoint reporting has become so popular. Who needs complete sentences when a key implication from the research can be reduced to a bullet list or an alluring infographic?

But what has become lost in the ever-increasingly-shrinking report is the discussion of research design. Where once at least cursory attention would be given to the basic design elements – this is what we did, this is when we did it, this is where we did it, and these are the demographics of the participants – in the first few pages of the report, this all-important information has been pushed to the back, sometimes to the appendix where it sits like frivolous or unwanted content begging to be ignored. Not only should the research design not be sequestered to the badlands of reporting but the discussion of research design in qualitative research should be expanded and enriched with details of the:

- qualitative method that was used (along with the rationale for using that method),
- target population,
- sample selection and composition of the participants,
- basis by which the interviewer's/moderator's guide was developed,
- reason that particular field sites and not others were chosen for the research,
- interviewer's/moderator's techniques for eliciting participants' responses,
- measures that were taken to maximize the credibility and analyzability of the data, and
- coding and other analysis procedures that were used to arrive at the reported interpretations and implications from the outcomes.

The inclusion and elaboration of the research design in qualitative reports matters. It matters because qualitative research has a life, and it is only the researcher's thick description of the paths and byways that the research traveled that allows the life of qualitative research to thrive beyond the study period. This is what transferability is all about. It is about giving the reader of your research the opportunity to apply the research design used in one context to another analogous context. This is not about generalization or reproducibility (quantitative concepts) but rather the idea that all users/readers of the report should have enough design-related information to determine for themselves whether or how the study parameters can be applied to similar populations. With a rich description of the research design, the end-user client, for instance, should be able to conclude:

- how the current study is the same or different than previous research efforts with the target audience,
- why the results from this study are the same or different than earlier research,
- how the results from this study can be applied to future qualitative and quantitative work, and
- how a similar research design can be used with other target segments or category subjects.

All research, but particularly qualitative research, can't live in a vacuum, unrelated to everything that has come before and will come after. Qualitative research has a life and needs to breathe. By expanding the depth and breadth of discussions devoted to research design in our reports, we give it the life it deserves.

Importance of Nonresponse in Qualitative Research

May 31, 2013

Nonresponse and non-response error is more than a quantitative issue. While qualitative researchers may shudder at the thought, the typically-ignored impact of nonresponse is just as important in the qualitative realm. Why is nonresponse in qualitative research important? Because we are conducting qualitative *research*. Not qualitative *let's get a few warm bodies around the table for our face-to-face focus group*, but actually research methods that, like all research, demand certain protocols that address potential biasing effects. One of these is nonresponse. The warm bodies in our group discussion may make the moderator and client observers feel great – Thank goodness, someone showed up! – but the uncomfortable reality is that the people who chose not to participate – or were never contacted by a recruiter and asked to participate in the first place – greatly affect our research outcomes. Indeed, the trajectory of a group discussion has as much to do with the people sitting around a table as it does with those who aren't there.

Who are the folks that the recruiter glossed over and never contacted on our sample list? How are the people who elect to attend our group discussion the same or different than those who didn't? And, without knowing the answers to these questions, how can qualitative researchers put their research findings into any perspective? How do they know what they think they know?

This is why, among other things, researchers need to pay more attention to gaining cooperation in their qualitative studies. Fortunately for the qualitative researcher, there are many ways to improve cooperation and thereby decrease the threat from nonresponse. For example, the design of a focus group study needs to carefully consider the personal circumstances of potential participants, i.e., where they are, what they do in their day, how they communicate, etc. This should lead to design considerations such as:

- Location, e.g., Does the researcher need to give participants a choice of location, such as an uptown or downtown facility?
- Time, e.g., Is 6:00 p.m. really the best time for participants to meet?
- Incentive, e.g., What type of material and/or non-material incentive "makes sense" for this participant segment?
- Mode of contact, e.g., Are participants most likely to respond to phone, email, or the U.S. mail as way of contact and how should the researcher combine these modes to gain greater cooperation?

And, at a minimum, the recruiting screener should:

- Communicate the purpose of the study to arouse interest in participating without introducing details that may influence participants' feedback in the discussion;

- Communicate a personal benefit or non-material motivation (e.g., telling suburban women that their participation in a discussion concerning the local shopping mall is their opportunity to contribute to the creation of an improved shopping environment);
- Mention the material incentives, such as the nature of the incentive (e.g., cash, a gift card, prized tickets to a sporting event, donation to a favorite charity, etc.) and the value;
- Identify the study's sponsor; and
- Provide logistical details so that showing up for the focus group – face-to-face, on the telephone, or online – is easy and uncomplicated.

To Deceive…or Not?

June 30, 2013

Ethical considerations play an important role in the research we do. Of all researchers, however, the ethnographer may be the most likely to face difficult ethical considerations and decisions that directly impact study design. One reason is that covert observation is a fairly common design feature in ethnographic research and these researchers live with the secrecy of deception.

There are many well-documented covert ethnographic studies, some of which became highly controversial for their use of deceptive tactics. Carolyn Ellis (1986), for example, conducted a nine-year observation of a Guinea (traditional watermen) community in the tidewater region of Virginia whose townspeople befriended her unaware that the sole purpose of her visits was to further her research endeavor. She quickly became a "traitor" when her prize-winning book on the research went public.

Deviant and subculture groups have also been the target of covert ethnographies. Humphreys' (1970) classic study on male homosexual bathroom trysts involved the researcher serving as a watchdog for quick sexual liaisons in public bathrooms between male strangers. The researcher obtained the names and addresses of these men by using public records to look up their automobile license plate numbers. One year later, he visited these men, pretended to be conducting survey research on mental health and, in so doing, conducted 50 interviews that appeared to have nothing to do with the men's earlier bathroom-sex activities.   Despite generating interesting findings, this study was extremely controversial in terms of its ethics and, among other things, contributed to the elimination of the sociology department at Washington University (where Humphreys had received his doctorate degree).

Other covert ethnographies involving deviant groups include the work of: Adler (1990) who justified her and her husband's covert passive participation in a study investigating drug trafficking by the "illegal nature of the activity and the degree of suspiciousness" they witnessed among the participants (i.e., the drug dealers), as well as the "necessity for maintaining relationships with our key informants"; Tewksbury (2002) who used covert observation to investigate the "social and sexual dynamics" of two gay bathhouses as a complete participant (i.e., as a real member of the bathhouses), justifying the covert strategy based on earlier work in this area; Andriotis (2010) who studied a gay nude beach in the context of an "erotic oasis" as an onsite non-participant observer; and Griffiths (2011) who justified his covert onsite non-participant observation of gambling behavior based on the fact that the research sites were public venues.

Like the practice of ethnography itself, researchers and those that consume ethnographic research findings do not necessarily agree on whether or not deception is acceptable and about the need (some would say "obligation") to debrief the observed participants who have been deceived by covert researchers; however, most do believe that there should not be an outright ban on covert observation.   Even the "Use of Deception in Research" clause in the *Code of Ethics* from the American Sociological Association states that there are a number of conditions under which "deceptive techniques" are permissible (American Sociological Association, 1999). And similarly,

the American Psychological Association acknowledges in their *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* that there are valuable research studies that could not be conducted without the use of deception (American Psychological Association, 2010).

Some have justified covert observation when studying "powerful and elite" groups (e.g., politicians, corporate executives) who would otherwise be difficult to access due to gatekeepers or who may only agree to participate if allowed to review and edit the researcher's field notes. Whatever the reason, researchers generally believe that some form of covert observation may be necessary to gain unbiased data and, indeed, much of the ethnographic research conducted on the Internet is covert in nature.

The question of deception is all around us. But it is the ethnographer who most often lives and breathes in the shadows of covert research, regardless if the observation is off- or onsite, face-to-face or remote, or the observer participates in the study activity or not.

10 Distinctive Qualities of Qualitative Research

July 31, 2013

Researchers conduct qualitative research because they acknowledge the human condition and want to learn more, and think differently, about a research issue than what is usual from mostly numerical quantitative survey research data. Not surprisingly, the unique nature of qualitative inquiry is characterized by a distinctive set of attributes, all of which impact the design of qualitative research one way or the other. The 10 unique attributes of qualitative research are the:


1. **Absence of "truth"** With all the emphasis in qualitative research on reality and the human condition, it might be expected that qualitative inquiry is in the business of garnering "the truth" from participants. Instead of "truth," the qualitative researcher collects information from which some level of knowledge can be gained. The researcher does not acquire this information and knowledge in a vacuum but rather in a context and, in this way, the research data are a product of various situational factors. For this reason, qualitative researchers do not talk about the "truth" of their findings but rather the "plausibility" of their interpretations.

2. **Importance of context** A relevant factor in the elusiveness of "truth" is the central and significant role context plays in qualitative research. Whether it be the physical environment or mode by which an in-depth interview (IDI), group discussion, or observation is conducted the outcomes in qualitative research hinge greatly on the contexts from which we obtain this data.

3. **Importance of meaning** Although the goal of all research is to draw meaning from the data, qualitative research is unique in the dimensionality of this effort. Qualitative researchers derive meaning from the data by way of multiple sources, evaluating any number of variables such as: the context, the language, the impact of the participant-researcher relationship, the potential for participant bias, and the potential for researcher bias.

4. **Researcher-as-instrument** Along with the emphases on context, meaning, and the potential for researcher subjectivity, qualitative research is distinguished by the fact it places the researcher at the center of the data-gathering phase and, indeed, the researcher is the instrument by which information is collected. The closeness of the researcher to the research participants and subject matter instills an in-depth understanding which can prove beneficial to a thorough analysis and interpretation of the outcomes; however, this intimacy heightens concerns regarding the researcher's ability to collect (and interpret) data in an objective, unbiased manner.

5. **Participant-researcher relationship** Closely associated with the idea that the researcher is the tool by which data are gathered is the important function of the participant-researcher relationship in qualitative research and its impact on research outcomes. This relationship is at the core of IDIs, group discussions, and participant observation, where participants and researchers share the "research space" within which certain conventions for communicating (knowingly or not) may be formed and which, in turn, shapes the reality the researcher is capturing in the data.

6. **Skill set required of the researcher** Qualitative research requires a unique set of skills from the researcher, skills that go beyond the usual qualities of organization, attention to detail, and analytical abilities that are necessary for all researchers. Techniques to build rapport with participants and active listening skills are only two examples. Qualitative researchers also need a special class of analytical skills that can meet the demands of "messy analysis" (see below) in qualitative inquiry where context, social interaction, and numerous other inter-connected variables contribute to the realities researchers take away from the field.

7. **Flexibility of the research design** A defining characteristic of qualitative research is the flexibility built into the research design. For instance, it is not until a focus group moderator is actually in a group discussion that he or she understands which topical areas to pursue more than others or the specific follow-up (probing) questions to interject. And, a participant observer has little control over the activities of the observed and, indeed, the goal of the observer is to be as unobtrusive and flexible as possible in order to capture the reality of the observed events.

8. **Types of issues or questions effectively addressed by qualitative research** Qualitative research is uniquely suited to address research issues or questions that might be difficult, if not impossible, to investigate under more structured, less flexible research designs. Qualitative inquiry effectively tackles: sensitive or personal issues such as domestic violence and sexual dysfunction; intricate topics such as personal life histories; nebulous questions such as "Is the current school leadership as effective as it could be?"; and contextual issues such as in-the-moment decision-making. Similarly, qualitative research is useful at gaining meaningful information from hard-to-reach or underserved populations such as children of all ages, subcultures, and deviant groups.

9. **Messy analysis and inductive approach** Without a doubt, qualitative research analysis is messy. The analysis of qualitative data does not follow a straight line, where point 'A' leads to point 'B', but rather is a multi-layered, involved process that continually builds upon itself until a meaningful and verifiable interpretation is achieved. The messiness of the interconnections, inconsistencies, and seemingly illogical input reaped in qualitative research demand that researchers embrace the tangles of their data from many sources. A large contributor to the "messiness" of the analytical process is the inductive method. Qualitative researchers analyze their outcomes from the inside out, organizing and deriving meaning from the data by way of the data itself.

10. **Unique capabilities of online and mobile qualitative research** Online and mobile technology offer unique enhancements to qualitative research design. In large part, this technology has shifted the balance of power from the researcher to the online or mobile participant who is given greater control of the research process by way of more flexibility, convenience, and ways to respond in greater detail and depth to the researcher's questions.

Multi-method & Case-centered Research: When the Whole is Greater Than the Sum of its Parts

August 19, 2013
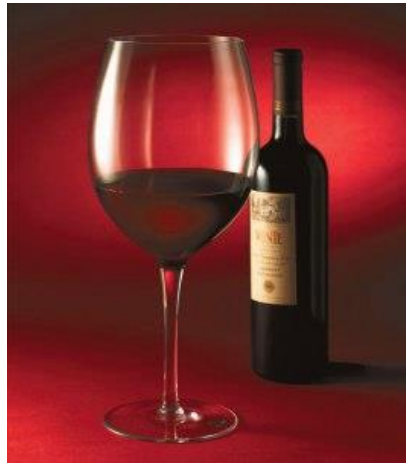
Multi-method research enables the qualitative researcher to study relatively complex entities or phenomena in a way that is holistic and retains meaning. The purpose is to tackle the research objective from all the methodological sides. Rather than pigeonholing the research into a series of IDIs, focus groups, or observations, the multi-method approach frees the researcher into total immersion with the subject matter. Multi-method strategies are particularly relevant in case-centered research such as case studies and narrative research. For instance, a case study concerning a state-wide drug prevention program might include IDIs with the program staff and volunteers, observations of program activities, group discussions with program participants, and a review of administrative documents. Similarly, a narrative study to explore the manner in which 8th grade science is taught in the city schools might be designed to include many methods in order to frame the narrative environment such as: in-class teacher observations, teachers' lived stories captured by way of IDIs or autobiographical "essays," teachers' daily journal entries concerning classroom activities, and visual images of the classes in progress. Although a single-method would provide insights on one aspect, it would fall short in giving the researcher a complete and realistic (i.e., broad and deep) picture of the drug-prevention program or 8th grade science. Yes, it is true that allowing science teachers to tell their stories would contribute important personal perspectives related to their teaching role, but this would ultimately deliver a shallow understanding compared to what the researcher could gain from enriching teachers' stories by way of input from other contexts (e.g., in-class observations and daily journals).

A multi-method approach such as case study and narrative research are differentiated from other qualitative methods in many ways, a few include:

- The focus of the research design is on the case itself – the subject of inquiry, such as the state's drug-prevention program or the teaching of 8th grade science – not the particular methods that are used to conduct the research.
- Each case in a case study or narrative research project is treated as a unit throughout all phases of the research. It is the case as an entity that is important to the researcher, not the categorical reduction of its elements.
- The subject matter and research objectives are typically complex. A case study of a non-profit organization, for instance, would have limited value if the qualitative researcher only explored one or two of the organization's programs in one geographic location.
- Likewise, case-centered research embraces the diversity of events, people, and circumstances that define a particular case.
- The elements that make up the entity of a case-centered study are interrelated. Case research investigating employment practices at a large manufacturing company, for instance, would use various methods to look at the connections between many factors, including staff
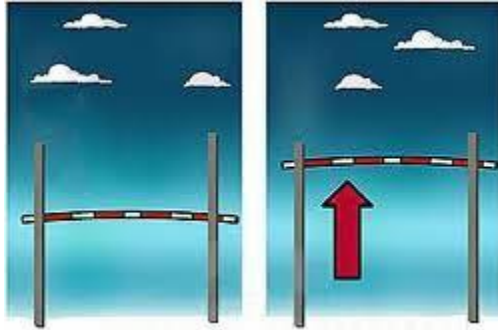
training and attitudes, outreach efforts, employment policies and benefits, union versus non-union opportunities, plant versus office working conditions, and the job pool.

Not unlike a fine wine, the case in case-centered research is made up of a complex web of interrelated facets, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Multi-method research examines these parts while not disturbing the whole.

Raising the Bar in Qualitative Research Proposals

September 10, 2013

Approximately two years ago, a post in *Research Design Review* described a quality framework that is recommended as a guide to researchers in their qualitative research designs. This post – "Four Components of the Quality Framework for Qualitative Research Design" – talks about the benefits of grounding qualitative design in a framework by which the researcher can "judge the efficacy" as well as "examine the sources of variability and establish critical thinking in the process of qualitative research design." The four components of the quality framework (QF) revolve around the idea that all qualitative research must be: credible, analyzable, transparent, and ultimately useful.

In the current post, qualitative researchers are encouraged to put the QF to work in a very important applied arena – i.e., the crafting and evaluating of research proposals. For instance, a QF approach to qualitative research deserves prominence in: (a) the proposals written by graduate students working towards their theses and dissertations; (b) proposals written by researchers in the academic, government, not-for-profit, and commercial sectors responding to clients' requests for proposal (RFPs); and (c) proposals written for grants. Taking a quality perspective in the research proposal raises the bar on the critical thinking skills utilized by researchers in the preparation of qualitative research proposals, as well as the criteria by which proposal guidelines and RFPs are written, and the processes by which these proposals are evaluated by reviewers.

A research proposal guided by a quality framework (QF) differs from other research proposal formats in one overarching way – quality-design issues play a central role throughout the proposal and in any evaluation of the proposal. For example, from the outset, a QF proposal couches the introductory discussions concerning research objectives and the significance of the proposed research around the component of Usefulness and its emphasis on new insights, next steps, and transferability about which the researchers, clients, and other users can be confident. Among other purposes, the literature review section of a QF research proposal discusses past research in the literature from the point of view of the four framework components, highlighting how the proposed new research will improve on earlier work by incorporating a fundamental quality assessment of the reliability and accuracy of previous studies being reviewed. In the method section, a QF research proposal elaborates on the discussion of data collection from the standpoint of the Credibility component – where population coverage and measurement issues such as interviewer bias or inter-observer reliability play important roles – and data analysis in terms of the Analyzability component, where the focus is on the critical areas of processing (e.g., transcriptions) and verification (e.g., peer debriefings and triangulation). And, unlike most qualitative research proposals, a QF research proposal includes a section specific to Transparency with an emphasis on the final deliverables, how the researcher plans to provide complete disclosure ("thick description") in the research report document, and a rundown of the supporting materials that will also be included, e.g., the reflexive journal, interview guide, and the like.

A QF research proposal may very well result in a lengthier proposal than is now typical but the result is a more complete and compelling document that more fully informs the person reviewing

the proposal and, as importantly, forces the qualitative researcher to think carefully about each aspect of the research from the standpoint of credibility, analyzability, transparency, and its ultimate usefulness.

Exploring the True Colors in Qualitative Data

September 21, 2013

Reliability, in the sense of being able to obtain identical findings from repeated executions of a qualitative research design, is debatable. Validity, however, is another matter. Validity, in the sense of whether the qualitative researcher is collecting the information (data) he or she claims to be gathering (i.e., the accuracy of the data), is a topic worthy of much more discussion in the research community, or at the least a greater emphasis in our qualitative research designs. While qualitative researchers may not be able to replicate their studies, they surely have the means to consider the authenticity of the data.

There was a *Research Design Review* post back in 2010 that discussed the importance and appropriateness of validity in qualitative research, including the idea that there are ready-made techniques for looking at validity in qualitative research and that, in some ways, validity is already built into our research methods. To illustrate how qualitative researchers typically incorporate validity into their research, the 2010 post offered this example:

The focus group moderator has control of question administration by the fact that questions can be probed for clarification and mis-(or unintended) interpretations of questions can be unearthed on the spot. This ability enables the researcher to realize the true meaning of questions asked, understand the alternative interpretations, and thereby add greater veracity and transparency into the design.

This, of course, is just one example. There are other ways in which qualitative researchers have the ability to validate outcomes, such as:

- **"Member checking"** – The ethnographer interviews individuals subsequent to an observation to help explain observational data; or the narrative researcher shares his or her interpretation of the story with the narrator to judge its accuracy against the narrator's intent.
- **Triangulation** – The data resulting from a series of in-depth interviews are reviewed alongside the outcomes from focus groups conducted on the same subject matter and with the same research objective.
- **Peer review** – The researcher provides the transcripts from an online bulletin board study with a knowledgeable colleague and asks for an independent interpretation of the data.
- **Deviant case analysis** – The case study researcher examines the data from the multiple methods used to investigate the case with an eye on particular outcomes that refute or otherwise contradict the prevailing findings.

It would be a step forward if the notion of validity – the specific measures to explore it and the effect this effort has on the quality of the research – was a regular ingredient in qualitative research designs and the proposals written for funding. Qualitative research is complex and messy, but that does not mean that we cannot show the true colors of our outcomes by way of the many validation techniques at our disposal.

"What the heck is this?" Calming the Fears of Qualitative Research

October 15, 2013

Through history, research people have discussed and debated the virtues and fallibilities of quantitative versus qualitative research. "Versus" because there is typically a 'one or the other' mentality in thinking and talking about quantitative and qualitative research that may ultimately pit one against the other. This dichotomy makes obvious sense from the standpoint of the very different purposes and approaches prescribed by these two research genres, fostering as it often does two very different types of researchers with sometimes radically different mind and skill sets.

There are situations – we can all probably think of some – when a survey or focus group (or IDI or observation) research design is opted for simply because it is the type of research that falls within someone's comfort zone. We go with what we know. This is true of researchers; it is also true of corporate clients and other research funders.

Many qualitative researchers, for instance, are loath to venture into survey territory where the stark realities of black and white numbers, percentages, and correlations are too confining as they are mind-blowing. And it is usually this qualitative-fear-of-quantitative that we hear so much about. But what about survey researchers and the clients who find a safe haven in quantitative methods? Do they share a similar dread of qualitative research and, if so, why?

Answer: Yes they do, because qualitative research is messy and messiness is a scary thing if you don't know what to do with it.

I am not talking about a fear of messiness from a left brain-right brain standpoint – the idea that qualitative demands greater right-brain thinking as it delves into reading emotions compared to the logic of critical reasoning in survey research – but rather a genuine fear of not knowing how to approach, much less analyze, the tangled convolution of real life embraced by qualitative research.

Evidence of this is found everywhere. It is found among research clients who are enthralled by the volume of rich feedback provided by online bulletin boards but are at a loss to know what it really means; or survey researchers who shy away from a qualitative approach to a highly personal, emotional research issue because they fear they are incapable of making sense of the data; or client-observers at a focus group discussion who define their takeaway from the first provocative statement made by a group participant because they haven't been educated on the discussion as a research method and how to properly listen to and understand the outcomes; or quantitative researchers who are scared off from the inductive analytical approach in qualitative research that appears to be a mere "fishing expedition"; or the client who listens to a batch of IDIs and comes away confused by the seemingly disconnected thoughts, concluding that the whole research effort has been a waste of time.

In every case, the researcher/client who defines "research" through quantitative-tinted glasses looks at qualitative research and is left asking, "What the heck is this?" The onus is on qualitative researchers to address this question by calming the fear of the unknown and making qualitative research approachable as well as ultimately more usable. Qualitative researchers can begin by:

- Doing more than just preparing the funder and/or user of the research on what to expect from qualitative research – i.e., the apparent discontinuities, inconsistencies, and irrational thinking – but also promoting the realness of qualitative research along with the idea that it is a good thing when responses don't follow a straight line from point 'A' to point 'B' because that is what conducting research with human beings is all about.
- Explaining why a discussion or interview guide is designed the way it is, why topical areas and related questions are formatted a certain way or are in a certain sequence. For example, the moderator should go through the guide with those who will be observing (or listening to) a focus group explaining the importance of each area, saying "Now, in this section I would like you to be listening for…" and "Responses to this section will allow us to better understand participants' thinking when we get to the last section of the guide."
- Conducting better debriefs. Unless the researcher (interviewer, moderator, observer) takes the initiative to conduct a thorough debrief, the client/funder/user of the research is left to his or her own (misguided) interpretations. Proper debriefs are an important part of the education process.
- Explaining the analytical process. Many people who request and ultimately use qualitative research are not knowledgeable about what goes into analysis. Not having done it themselves (or only on a cursory level) they are not informed about this process and how the researcher's interpretations are not the product of any one thing but a multiplicity of variables within the data. This should pose another opportunity for the researcher to promote and educate the users of the research on how and why qualitative research is done.
- Connecting the dots in the final research document. This requires the researcher to resist the frequent request for a whittled-down version of the outcomes in a colorful yet wanting PowerPoint slideshow. Instead of a colorful graphic, the researcher's job is to explain the analysis that was conducted, the complexity of the data and how each piece connects with another piece (or doesn't), and the nuanced story that lies within.

Projective Techniques: Do We Know What They Are Projecting?

November 15, 2013

A focus group moderator's guide will often include group exercises or facilitation techniques as alternative approaches to direct questioning. While many of these alternative tactics are not unique to the group discussion method, and are also used in in-depth interview research, they have become a popular device in focus groups, esp., in the marketing research field. These alternative approaches can be broadly categorized as either enabling or projective techniques, the difference being whether the moderator's intent is to simply modify a direct question to make it easier for group participants to express their opinions (enabling techniques) or delve into participants' less conscious, less rational, less socially-acceptable feelings by way of indirect exercises (projective techniques). Examples of enabling techniques are: sentence completion – e.g., "When I think of my favorite foods, I think of _____." or "The best thing about the new city transit system is _____."; word association – e.g., asking prospective college students, "What is the first word you think of when I say, 'first day of college'?" or asking hospital administrators, "When I say 'patient care', what is the first word or words that come to mind?"; and storytelling – e.g., "Tell me a story about the last time you made something for dinner using leftovers."

Projective techniques serve to depersonalize the discussion by moving away from direct questions specific to the research topic and instead ask participants to project their feelings by imagining the thoughts of others, role playing, and describing visual stimuli (such as images). Completing thought bubbles on a cartoon drawing depicting genderless characters, and selecting from a stack of photographs the images that best represent how participants feel about a topic are just two examples of projective techniques.

The use of projective techniques is especially rampant among marketing researchers who increasingly (with the growing capabilities of online research) devise new variations of projective exercises. However, from a quality-design perspective, the use of projective techniques can be problematic and begs the question of whether or how much projective techniques bring added value to the group discussion. While enabling techniques are extensions of direct questioning that fall within the researcher's natural skill set, the indirect method of projective exercises drifts into the little-known realm, among many social science researchers, of clinical psychology. Regardless of whether focus group participants are given the opportunity to explain their own interpretation of their thought bubble, drawing, or picture sort – or whether the interpretation is left for the researcher – the inherent subjectivity of the meanings that are ultimately associated with participants' output threatens the validity of these techniques.

The credibility of qualitative research data partially rests on knowing what is being measured, yet the short duration of a focus group session – and the moderator's limited depth of knowledge about the participants – may make true interpretations of the data (and linkages back to the research

objectives) from projective techniques a challenge. What, for example, has the researcher measured from a collage exercise resulting in a collection of seemingly unrelated images from each of 10 group participants? The moderator can investigate each participant's interpretation of their "artwork" but the reality is that the focus group moderator does not have the capability of knowing whether the collage exercise tapped into an unconscious realization important to the research objectives, or knowing if the exercise measured aspects of the participant related to (for example) motivations, cultural background, or social awareness.

To maximize the credibility of focus group data stemming from the use of enabling and projective techniques, researchers must carefully select which techniques to use based on their ability to interpret the results in conjunction with the in-session time the moderator will be able to give to these exercises. For instance, the researcher might opt for a smaller discussion format, such as dyads and triads, in order to accommodate the necessary time to complete a projective technique, such as a picture sort, including a thorough examination of each participant's reasons for the photographs he or she selected as well as those that were rejected. The careful use of these techniques will not only enhance data credibility but also increase the overall quality of the research by allowing the researcher to perform necessary verification procedures (such as triangulation) in the analysis phase.