Qualitative Research:
Transparency & Reporting

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The contents of this compilation include a selection of 12 articles appearing in *Research Design Review* from 2012 to 2019 concerning transparency and reporting in qualitative research.
Excerpts and links may be used, provided that the proper citation is given.

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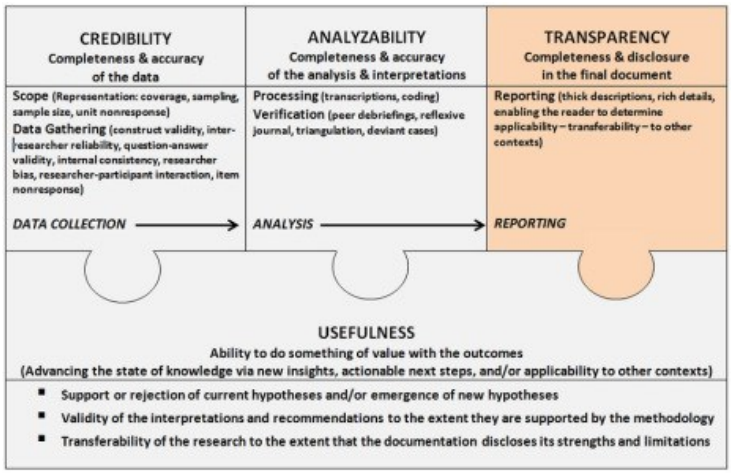
Transparent Qualitative Research: The Total Quality Framework Transparency Component

The Total Quality Framework (TQF)* contributes to the conversation in the qualitative research community by providing researchers with a way to think about their qualitative designs – along with strategies or techniques – for the purpose of enhancing the quality of research outcomes. The TQF is a comprehensive approach that considers all stages of the research process – from data collection to the final "product." Recent articles in *Research Design Review* discussed two of the four components of the TQF – specifically, the Credibility component and the Analyzability component. The Credibility component pertains to data collection and consists of Scope (having to do with sampling and coverage) and Data Gathering (having to do with minimizing potential bias, nonresponse, and other factors that may weaken the validity of the data). The Analyzability component of the TQF is focused on the Processing of qualitative data (e.g., the quality by which the initial "raw" data is transformed) as well as Verification of research findings and interpretations (e.g., by way of deviant cases, peer debriefs, the reflexive journal).



The third component of the TQF has to do with the next phase in a qualitative research design – that is, reporting. When the data has been collected and thoroughly processed and verified, the qualitative researcher is left with the job of effectively communicating what went on in the research study and how the researcher drew interpretations from the analysis. Importantly, the job of reporting goes beyond conveying the research findings and the researcher's interpretations and recommendations, but also gives details of the research design having to do with Scope and Data Gathering (i.e., Credibility) as well as Processing and Verification (i.e., Analyzability). As discussed in this 2013 *RDR* article, the benefit of a detailed discussion of Credibility and Analyzability lies in its ability to fully inform the user of the quality strategies or techniques that were (or were not) incorporated into the design and, among other things, allow the user to evaluate the transferability of the research design, i.e., how well it might be used in a comparable context.

The elaboration of study details is referred to as "thick description" which is a term originally coined by British philosopher Gilbert Ryle and then adopted by Clifford Geertz to describe the work being done in ethnography (Ponterotto, 2006). In this respect, Geertz (2003) talks about the "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures" (p. 150) in ethnographic research, stating that "ethnography *is* thick description" (p. 156, emphasis added). Similarly, the "multiplicity" of design decisions that qualitative researchers make before, during, and at the completion of a qualitative study warrant a thick description in the final reporting document that explodes with rich details by which the user can essentially re-live the research process. In doing so, the user is able to evaluate his/her confidence in the research process as well as the researcher's final interpretations and the applicability of the research to other contexts (i.e., transferability).

The TQF Transparency component has been discussed elsewhere in *RDR* – see "Reporting Qualitative Research: A Model of Transparency" – as has the concept of thick description – see "25 Ingredients to "Thicken" Description & Enrich Transparency in Ethnography." The specific elements of a thick description will vary from method to method and study to study. There are, however, common aspects of a qualitative research design that should be reported, some of which are the

- Researcher's assumptions regarding the necessary scope of the study.
- Decisions that were made related to sampling.
- Representativeness of the participants to the population and why that was or was not a concern.
- Level of cooperation and tactics that were used to maximize cooperation.
- Ethical considerations.
- Researcher/interviewer training.
- Interview/focus group guide development.
- Decisions that were made in the field, particularly decisions that changed the initial study design.
- Field notes and the researcher's reflexive journal.
- Transcription process.
- Data processing protocol and verification procedures.

As with Credibility and Analyzability, the Transparency component of the TQF is not intended to prescribe procedures or steps to follow in the reporting process but rather offer researchers a way of thinking about how to incorporate a complete accounting of a research study for the benefit of the user (e.g., the researcher, the research sponsor, a colleague working on a similar topic). It is by way of this thick description that qualitative researchers demonstrate their commitment to transparency while providing an audit trail of the relevant materials. This

transparent approach to reporting expands the life of any given study and achieves the ultimate goal of allowing the user to do something of value with the outcomes. That brings us to the fourth and final TQF component, Usefulness.

[*] The Total Quality Framework is fully discussed in Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach. New York: Guilford Press.

Geertz, C. (2003). Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. In Y. S. Lincoln & N. K. Denzin (Eds.), *Turning points in qualitative research: Tying knots in a handkerchief* (Vol. 3, pp. 143–168). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept "thick description." *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(3), 538–549. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR11-3/ponterotto.pdf

Casting a Light Into the Inner Workings of Qualitative Research

Research Design Review has discussed the idea of transparency on several occasions. A post in 2012, titled "Designing Qualitative Research to Produce Outcomes You Can Use," briefly mentioned the contribution transparency makes to the ultimate usefulness of a qualitative research study emphasizing that full disclosure of the study's details "empowers the reader of the research to make his or her own judgments as to the integrity of the research (Is it good research?) as well as its usefulness in furthering new ideas, next steps, and new applications." The goal of transparency is to provide an audit trail in the final research document that allows the reader to duplicate the research (if that were possible), derive similar conclusions from the data as presented, or apply the research in other contexts. Transparency is important.

Transparency in the final document goes way beyond a simple account of the number and time frame when interviews, groups, or observations were conducted and a rundown of participants' characteristics. In order for clients and other users of the research to ascertain the reliability, validity, and transferability of the outcomes, the researcher's final deliverables need to include details concerning the:

- Researcher's justification and assumptions prior to the fieldwork concerning the sample population, data collection techniques, and expected outcomes;
- Sampling, esp. the determination of the appropriate number of events (interviews, groups, observations) to conduct, the sampling frame and process of participant selection, and the efforts that were made to select a representative sample of the target population, including possible biases or weaknesses in the data due to the lack of representation;
- Decisions that were made while the research was in the field that modified the original research objectives or design elements (e.g., reasons for switching from face-to-face to online mode because of unexpected costs and time delays) and how these decisions may have impacted outcomes;

- Researcher's reflexive journal (a diary of in-the-field feelings, hunches, insights), including a critical account of his/her attitudes and behavior during the research event that may have biased the outcomes;
- Transcription and coding processes; and,
- Steps that were taken to verify the outcomes, such as detailed accounts of peer debriefings, triangulation efforts (e.g., inter-interviewer reliability, "member checking"), and analysis of negative or deviant cases.

Without transparency in our qualitative research designs, how are the buyers and users of our research to know what they are getting? How are they to know if what is being shown as the outcomes is actually worthy of attention, actually true to the research objectives, to the people participating in the research, and to the researcher's conclusions and recommended next steps? By casting a light into the inner workings of our research – from conceptualization to completion – we allow others to see how the pieces of the design connect with each other, including the dips and turns the research took to eventually produce a functioning final result. This is transparency.

25 Ingredients to "Thicken" Description & Enrich Transparency in Ethnography

Transparency plays a pivotal role in the final product of any research study. It is by revealing the study's intricacies and details in the final document that the ultimate consumers of the research gain the understanding they need to (a) fully comprehend the people, phenomena, and context under investigation; (b) assign value to the interpretations and recommendations; and/or (c) transfer some aspect of the study to other contexts. Transparency, and its importance to the research process, has been discussed often in this blog, with articles in November 2009 and December 2012 devoted to the topic.

At the core of transparency is the notion of "thick description." The use of the term here goes beyond its traditional meaning of

"describing and interpreting observed social action (or behavior) within its particular context…[along with] the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively 'place' themselves within the research context" (Ponterotto, 2006, p. 543).

to also include detailed information pertaining to data collection and analysis. Ethnography, for example, is greatly enriched ("thickened") by the reporting of specifics in 25 areas related to the:

1. Research objectives, hypotheses, constructs, and an explanation as to why ethnography was the best approach.
2. Target population.
3. Sampling, e.g., determining sample size and participant/site selection.
4. Individuals or groups that were observed and their representativeness of the target population.
5. Rationale for opting for a nonparticipant or participant observer role and the mode.
6. Rationale for the choice of overt or covert observation.

7. Observation sites.
8. Rationale for the number of scheduled observations.
9. Status of scheduled observations, e.g., how many and which of those scheduled were actually completed.
10. Ethical considerations.
11. Other methods (such as in-depth interviews) that were used to augment the observations.
12. Decisions that were made in the field that had the effect of altering the research objectives and/or aspects of the research design.
13. Observer training that took place to mitigate observer effects.
14. Role of gatekeepers and key informants.
15. Observers' reflexive journals.
16. Unanticipated events that took place during the observations, e.g., the revelation of a covert observer's identity.
17. Use of extended or expanded observations for verification purposes.
18. Verification efforts beyond expanded observations.
19. Operational logistics, e.g., recordings, mapping.
20. Transcription processes.
21. Coding procedures.
22. Thematic and pattern-building analytical processes.
23. Specific observed events and related evidence that exemplify the final interpretations of the data.
24. Particular steps that were taken for an online ethnography.
25. Members of the research team.

Ponterotto, J. G. (2006). Brief note on the origins, evolution, and meaning of the qualitative research concept "thick description." *The Qualitative Report*, *11*(3), 538–549.

Image captured from: http://pragyabhagat.blogspot.com/2010_11_01_archive.html

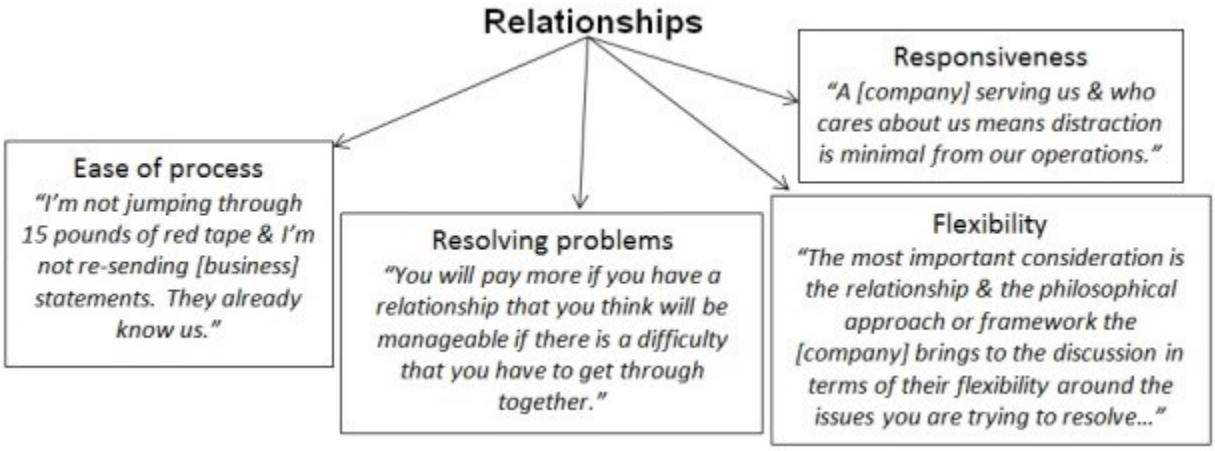
The Use of Quotes & Bringing Transparency to Qualitative Analysis

The use of quotes or verbatims from participants is a typical and necessary component to any qualitative research report. It is by revealing participants' exact language that the researcher helps the user of the research to understand the key takeaways by clarifying through illustration the essential points of the researcher's interpretations. The idea is not to display an extensive list of what people said but rather provide quotes that have been carefully selected for being the most descriptive or explanatory of the researcher's conceptual interpretation of the data. As Susan Morrow has written

"An overemphasis on the researcher's interpretations at the cost of participant quotes will leave the reader in doubt as to just where the interpretations came from [however] an excess of quotes will cause the reader to become lost in the morass of stories." (Morrow, 2005, p. 256)

By embedding carefully chosen extracts from participants' words in the final document, the researcher uniquely gives participants a voice in the outcomes while contributing to the credibility – *and transparency* – of the research. In essence, the use of verbatims gives the users of the research a peek into the analyst's codebook by illustrating how codes associated with particular categories or themes in the data were defined during the analysis process.

As an example, the analysis of data from a recent in-depth interview study among business decision makers determined that the broad concept of "relationships" was a critical factor to driving certain types of decisions. That alone is not a useful finding; however, the analysis of data within this category uncovered themes that effectively gave definition to the "relationships" concept. As shown below, the definitional themes, in conjunction with illustrative quotes from participants, give the reader a concise and useful understanding of "relationships."



In this way, quotes contribute much-needed transparency to the analytical process. As discussed elsewhere in *Research Design Review* (e.g., see this April 2017 article), transparency in the final document is built around "thick description," defined as "a complete account…of the phenomena under investigation as well as the rich details of the data collection and analysis processes and interpretations of the findings" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015, p. 363). One of the ingredients in a thick description of the analytical process is the details of code development and the coding procedures. The utilization of verbatims from participants in the final report adds to the researcher's thick description (and transparency) by helping to convey the researcher's thinking during data analysis and how that thinking steered the creation and application of codes.

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *52*(2), 250–260.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2015). *Applied qualitative research design: A total quality framework approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

Image captured from: https://cdmginc.com/testing-corner-quotation-marks-add-power/

The Asynchronous Focus Group Method: Participant Participation & Transparency

There is a great deal that is written about transparency in research. It is generally acknowledged that researchers owe it to their research sponsors as well as to the broader research community to divulge the details of their designs and the implementation of their studies. Articles pertaining to transparency have been posted throughout *Research Design Review*.

The need for transparency in qualitative research is as relevant for designs utilizing off-line modes, such as in-person interviews and focus group discussions, as it is for online research, such as asynchronous focus groups. A transparency detail that is critical for the users of online asynchronous – not-in-real-time – focus group discussions research is the level of participant participation. This may, in fact, be the most important information concerning an asynchronous study that a researcher can provide.

Participation level in asynchronous discussions is particularly important because participation in the online asynchronous mode can be erratic and weak. Nicholas et al. (2010) found that "online focus group participants offered substantially less information than did those in the [in-person] groups" (p. 114) and others have underscored a serious limitation of this mode; that is, "it is very difficult to get subjects with little interest in [the topic] to participate and the moderator has more limited options for energising and motivating the participants" (Murgado-Armenteros et al., 2012, p. 79) and, indeed, researchers have found that "participation in the online focus group dropped steadily" during the discussion period (Deggs et al., 2010, p. 1032).

The integrity and ultimate usefulness of focus group data hinge solidly on the level of participation and engagement among group participants. This is true regardless of mode but it is a particularly critical consideration when conducting asynchronous discussions. Because of this and because transparency is vital to the health of the qualitative research community, focus group researchers employing the online asynchronous method are encouraged to continually monitor, record, and report on the rate and level of participation, e.g., how many and who (in terms of relevant characteristics) of the recruited sample entered into the discussion, how many and who responded to all questions, how thoughtful and in-depth (or not)

were responses, how many and who engaged with the moderator, and how many and who engaged with other participants.

This transparent account of participant participation offers the users of asynchronous focus group research an essential ingredient as they assess the value of the study conducted.

Deggs, D., Grover, K., & Kacirek, K. (2010). Using message boards to conduct online focus groups. Retrieved from http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR15-4/deggs.pdf

Murgado-Armenteros, E. M., Torres-Ruiz, F. J., & Vega-Zamora, M. (2012). Differences between online and face-to-face focus groups, viewed through two approaches. *Journal of Theoretical and Applied Electronic Commerce Research*, *7*(2), 73–86.

Nicholas, D. B., Lach, L., King, G., Scott, M., Boydell, K., Sawatzky, B., … Young, N. L. (2010). Contrasting Internet and face-to-face focus groups for children with chronic health conditions: Outcomes and participant experiences. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *9*(1), 105–122.

Image captured from: https://uwm.edu/studentinvolvement/student-organizations-2/our-communityinvolvement/

The Stanford Prison Experiment: A Case for Sharing Data

The October 2019 issue of *American Psychologist* included two articles on the famed Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) conducted by Philip Zimbardo in 1971. The first, "Rethinking the Nature of Cruelty: The Role of Identity Leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment" (Haslam, Reicher, & Van Bavel, 2019), discusses the outcomes of the SPE within the context of social identity and, specifically, identity leadership theories espousing, among other things, the idea that "when group identity becomes salient, individuals seek to ascertain and to conform to those understandings which define what it means to be a member of the relevant group" (p. 812) and "leadership is not just about how leaders act but also about their capacity to shape the actions of followers" (p. 813). It is within this context that the authors conclude from their examination of the SPE archival material that the "totality of evidence indicates that, far from slipping naturally into their assigned roles, some of Zimbardo's guards actively resisted [and] were consequently subjected to intense interventions from the experimenters" (p. 820), resulting in behavior "more consistent with an identity leadership account than…the standard role account" (p. 819).

In the second article, "Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment" (Le Texier, 2019), the author discusses his content analysis study of the documents and audio/video recordings retrieved from the SPE archives located at Stanford University and the Archives of the History of American Psychology at the University of Akron, including a triangulation phase by way of in-depth interviews with SPE participants and a comparative analysis utilizing various publications and texts referring to the SPE. The purpose of this research was to learn whether the SPE archives, participants, and comparative analysis would reveal "any important information about the SPE that had not been included in and, more importantly, was in conflict with that reported in Zimbardo's published accounts of the study" (p. 825). Le Texier derives a number of key findings from his study that shed doubt on the integrity of the SPE, including the fact that the prison guards were aware of the results expected from them and what they had to do to achieve those results, "the participants were almost never completely immersed in the unrealistic prison

situation" (p. 825), and the data collection and reporting process was "incomplete and biased" (p. 825).

Both articles were fundamentally supported by new details on the research method and the participants obtained from SPE archival material released online by Stanford University in 2018. It is by way of this new information that researchers are able to more fully examine the integrity of the research design and explore such questions as: What was the experimenters' leadership role in the SPE? How did this leadership role – that is, how did the experimenters – affect the outcomes and, specifically, the level of cruelty exhibited by the guards? and To what extent did the phenomenon of "demand characteristics" – associated with the experimenters' interactions with participants that emphasized the importance of the SPE, the special status of the participant (as someone carefully selected by the research team), as well as experimenters' coaching of the guards – impact participant behavior?

Disclosing methodological components of our research designs and sharing data are essential to becoming a contributing member of the research community. It is this obligation of transparency that ultimately rewards researchers by raising the bar on methodological integrity while bringing "quality issues to the forefront, leading to scholarly discussions and more explicit and critical self-evaluation, as well as new quality approaches to [research] design, implementation, and reporting" (Roller & Lavrakas, 2018, p. 396). The two articles discussed here concerning the SPE are indicative of how data sharing can help us think more deeply about the implications of our research designs and better understand those of others. In particular, the public discourse that has arisen in light of the recently released SPE archival material has led to healthy discussions such as this interview with Philip Zimbardo conducted in 2018 where Zimbardo is asked "What is the case that this experiment should be seen as anything more than an anecdote?" and "Do you think the experiment itself has a definitive scientific value?" And, importantly, where Zimbardo is given the opportunity to respond, stating "[The SPE is] a very powerful demonstration of a psychological phenomenon, and it has had relevance." and "The single conclusion is a broad line: Human behavior, for many people, is much more under the influence of social situational variables than we had ever thought of before."

Haslam, S. A., Reicher, S. D., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2019). Rethinking the nature of cruelty: The role of identity leadership in the Stanford Prison Experiment. *American Psychologist*. *74*(7), 809-822.

Le Texier, T. (2019). Debunking the Stanford Prison Experiment. *American Psychologist*. *74*(7), 823-839.

Roller, M. R., & Lavrakas, P. J. (2018). A Total Quality Framework approach to sharing qualitative research data: Comment on DuBois et al. (2018). *Qualitative Psychology*. *5*(3), 394-401.

Reporting Qualitative Research: A Model of Transparency

A number of articles in *Research Design Review* have discussed, in one form or another, the Total Quality Framework (TQF)* approach to qualitative research design. An *RDR* post last month pertained to applying the TQF to the in-depth interviewing method; while other articles have focused on ways to integrate quality measures – in harmony with the TQF – into ethnography, mobile research, and the research proposal. Separate from applications per se, an article in February 2015 discussed the compatibility of a quality approach with social constructionism.

One of the four components of the TQF is Transparency** which is specific to the reporting phase of the research process. In particular, Transparency has to do with the researcher's full disclosure of the research design, fieldwork, and analytical procedures in the final document. This sounds simple enough yet it is common to read qualitative research reports, papers, and articles that too quickly jump to research findings and discussion, with relatively scant attention given to the peculiarities of the design, data gathering, or analysis. This is unfortunate and misguided because these details are necessary for the user of the research to understand the context by which interpretations were derived and to judge the applicability of the outcomes to other situations (i.e., transferability).

There are, of course, exceptions; and, indeed, many researchers are skillful in divulging these all-important details. One example is Deborah C. Bailey's article, "Women and Wasta: The Use of Focus Groups for Understanding Social Capital and Middle Eastern Women." In it, Bailey provides a rich background of her involvement with this study, her interest in exploring "how some Islamic women from the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.) perceive access and use of the social capital identified as wasta" (p. 2) and the "bond of trust" she established with women attending Zayed University which furthered her research objective. The method section goes beyond simply stating that focus group discussions were conducted but rather gives the reader the researcher's justification for choosing focus groups over alternative methods, e.g., "focus groups work well for encouraging participants to explore topics that have shared social meaning but are

seldom discussed" (p. 3), explaining wasta as a "social phenomenon" and the supportive function focus groups provide.

Bailey goes on to describe how she chose her research team and the reflective exercise she conducted with the team prior to embarking on the study to "help them understand their own beliefs and experience about wasta" (p. 4). Bailey also explains how participants were chosen and the results of the recruiting process, as well as how she developed the discussion guide and her decision to use translators (allowing participants the option to speak Arabic as well as English). In the "Focus Group Process" section, Bailey recounts the introductory remarks that were made at the start of each focus group and explicitly states the seven key questions participants were asked during discussions.

The author's reporting of the analysis process and results is equally informative. Here, Bailey describes how the research team worked separately and together to derive categories and themes from the data; and, importantly, the inclusion of a reflective assessment among analysts to mitigate potential bias associated with personal beliefs during the analysis phase. In addition, Bailey inserted a "Wasta Focus Group Matrix" in the Appendix which provides an informative breakdown of categories and themes by the three wasta segments (i.e., high wasta, some wasta, and low wasta). Following analysis, Bailey gives the reader a well-thought out, clear, and useful discussion of results, enriched by numerous verbatims that support the findings.

Transparency in the reporting of qualitative research using thick description is critical to the integrity of the research process. Transparency enables users of the research to evaluate the outcomes within the proper context and determine the transferability of the research to other compatible situations or environments.

*An in-depth discussion of the Total Quality Framework can be found in *Applied Qualitative Research Design: A Total Quality Framework Approach* (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015. New York: Guilford Press.).

**The other three TQF components are: Credibility, Analyzability, and Usefulness. Transparency is discussed throughout *Research Design Review*, e.g., see this December 2012 article.

Image captured from: http://thecontextofthings.com/2016/04/18/transparency-in-business/

The Many Facets of a Meaningful Qualitative Report

Reporting in qualitative research, and particularly the element of transparency, has been the topic of various articles in *Research Design Review* (see "Reporting Qualitative Research: A Model of Transparency," "Reporting Ethnography: Storytelling & the Roles Participants Play," and others). While all types of research require complete and accurate reporting, the final report appears to be discussed less frequently compared to other aspects of the research process. This is certainly true in qualitative research. Just a look around *RDR* will prove the point that a greater emphasis has been paid to other research design areas – such as data collection and analysis – than to the actual reporting of the findings.

This needs to change. One could argue that the final written report is the most important component of the research process, the component that not only serves to document the study from beginning to end but also transforms qualitative research into a tangible, living "being" for the research users to grab hold of and utilize in any number of ways. Without the report, our research might as well not exist. This makes one wonder why relatively scant attention is paid to best practices in reporting and, indeed, why the final report in some research sectors (e.g., marketing research) is often reduced to a less-than-comprehensive, fully-bulleted PowerPoint slide deck.

For anyone interested in a serious discussion of the many facets of the qualitative report, an excellent resource is *Focus Group Discussions* by Monique Hennink (2014, Oxford University Press as part of their Understanding Qualitative Research series edited by Patricia Leavy). Although the book is centered on the focus group method, the chapters devoted to reporting offer relevant and useful guidance regardless of the qualitative approach. For example, Hennink's chapter on "Writing Focus Group Methods," discusses the challenges researchers face when attempting to give "methodological depth" to their reporting while also writing in a clear and concise manner. Using qualitative terminology such as *purposive* and *emic*, for instance, are important to conveying the qualitative orientation (and rigor) of the research; however, these concepts are not universally understood and require some form of explanation.

Following a discussion of *challenges*, the methods chapter goes on to detail the actual *writing* of the methods section. Here, Hennink stresses the importance of transparency; specifically, in reporting information on the: study design (e.g., how and why the particular method was chosen), research site(s) (e.g., where the research was conducted, what was the atmosphere or condition of the study environment), recruiting, study participants, data collection, analysis, as well as ethical issues. Equally important in the methods section are discussions emanating from reflexivity, i.e., the researcher's reflection on possible sources of bias in the data or analysis associated with the research team as well as limitations in the study (e.g., the research was only conducted with women of a certain age).

In her second chapter on writing, Hennink discusses the writing of results with a focus on "developing an argument" from which the narrative of the findings can be told and deciding on a reporting structure (e.g., by topics, population segments) as well as the use of quotations.

Importantly, Hennink discusses the crucial role of context in the reporting of both methods and results. In line with the qualitative research mantra "context is everything," Hennink encourages the researcher to report contextual details that potentially influenced the method(s) chosen and the research findings, thereby adding a depth of meaning by which users of the research are able to fully understand all aspects of the study. There are many ways the qualitative researcher can discuss context. Context can be discussed with respect to: circumstances that impacted the choice of research method, participants (their sociocultural background), the research environment(s), and the researcher (i.e., reflexivity).

Although the level of reporting advocated by Hennink is at the academic level, there are important lessons here for all qualitative researchers. Qualitative reporting requires a thorough and thoughtful process, one that communicates the richness of the qualitative approach and ultimately maximizes the Usefulness of the outcomes.

Image captured from: https://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/11/a-poem-inspired-by-writers-block-yoli-ramazzina-poem/

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

"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 is that their all-too-busy clients do not 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 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, cannot 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.

Giving Voice: Reflexivity in Qualitative Research

Homegoing, the debut novel by Yaa Gyasi, is a moving tale of slavery and its translation across generations. At one point, we read about a descendant in Ghana who teaches history and on the first day of class stumbles on a lesson concerning "the problem of history." The problem he refers to is that history is constructed from stories that are handed down over time yet "We cannot know which story is correct because we were not there." He goes on to say to his students

We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture. (pp. 226-227)

The month of February seems like an appropriate time to reflect on power and what we as researchers are missing in our studies of vulnerable and marginalized segments of the population. After all, with the exception of participatory research, we are typically the ones who control the design and implementation of data collection along with the analysis, interpretation, and reporting of the findings.

Reflection on our role in the research process should be common practice. But our reflection takes on new meaning when our participants are those with the weakest voice. As we sit down with our reflexive journal and consider our prejudices and subjectivities (by asking ourselves the kinds of questions outlined in this *RDR* article), researchers might do well to pay particular attention to their assumptions and beliefs – What assumptions did I make about the participant(s)? and How did my personal values, beliefs, life story, and/or social/economic status affect or shape: the questions I asked, the interjections I made, my listening skills, and/or my behavior?

Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett (2003) address this in their discussion on interviewing Black women on sensitive topics. As Black women themselves, they felt no less obligated to reflect on their status.

As Black feminist qualitative researchers, we are particularly attuned to how we become the research instruments and the primary sieves of re/presentation in our exploration of Black womanhood. (p. 213)

By way of this reflection, the authors make recommendations toward the interviewing of Black women on sensitive topics, including such concepts as "contextualizing self in the research process." The authors also come to the realization that "the diversity of Black experience has been misrepresented [by] traditional family studies orientations," asserting that "the persistent matrix of intersectionality that Black women endure, succumb, and overcome" cannot be fully addressed if "researchers debate and deconstruct out of existence the 'critical essences' (i.e., race, class, and gender) that matter to Black women's existence and survival in this world" (p. 213).

So, take another look at your reflexive journal. Take another look at your research with the vulnerable and marginalized. And, if not already there, consider adding these queries – so well put by Gyasi – to your journal: Whose story am I missing? Whose voice has been suppressed? Whose story do I need to seek out to help me gain a clearer, more complete picture of the people and the phenomenon I hope to illuminate through my research? How, indeed, have I used my power as a researcher to give center stage to the "critical essences" of society's minority voices?

Few, A. L., Stephens, D. P., & Rouse-Arnett, M. (2003). Sister-to-sister talk: Transcending boundaries and challenges in qualitative research with Black women. *Family Relations*, *52*(3), 205–215.

Image captured from: https://jennymackness.wordpress.com/category/connectedcourses/

Accounting for Interactions in Focus Group Research

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 an 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 secret we harbor, leaving 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.

Reporting Ethnography: Storytelling & the Roles Participants Play

In Chapter 10 of Sam Ladner's book *Practical Ethnography: A Guide to Doing Ethnography in the Private Sector*, the author discusses a best practice approach to reporting ethnographic research for a corporate audience. She states that "private-sector ethnographic reports are successful if they are dramatic and consistent with the organization's truth regime" (p.165). To this end, Ladner recommends text reports with "clickable hyperlinks" throughout and supplemental material, such as a PowerPoint presentation, that acts as the "marketing campaign" or "movie trailer" for the text document.

As another "delightful element" to the ethnography report, Ladner suggests the use of personas or archetypes, each representing a depiction of participants that share a particular characteristic. This is "a useful way to summarize the voluminous amount of qualitative data" (p. 167); however, Ladner cautions that personas "are often done badly" and points to Steve Portigal's article on the subject matter, "Persona Non Grata." In it, Portigal advocates for maintaining the "realness" of research participants rather than manufacturing a "falsehood" (by way of personas) that distances the users of the research from the people they want to know most about. Portigal encourages researchers to engage with the "messiness of actual human beings," emphasizing that "people are too wonderfully complicated to be reduced to plastic toys [that is, personas]."

Reporting observational research for corporate users can be a challenge. On the one hand, the researcher is obligated to dig into the messiness of analysis and convey an honest accounting of what the researcher saw and heard. On the other hand, the final reporting is meaningless if no one pays attention to it, thereby preventing the research from having the desired effect of bringing new energy and a new way of thinking to the organization. Ladner and Portigal agree that powerful storytelling grounded in reality is the best approach, but how do we create a

compelling drama while maintaining the integrity of our data? A combination of formats, as Ladner suggests, is one tactic. And the use of personas may be another. An open and ongoing discussion among researchers about personas – *if* and *how* the roles we assign the actors in our final story are (or can be) created while staying true to the study participants – seems like a worthwhile effort.

Image captured from: https://www.thestage.co.uk/features/2015/386081/