Reading and Understanding Research *3rd edition*

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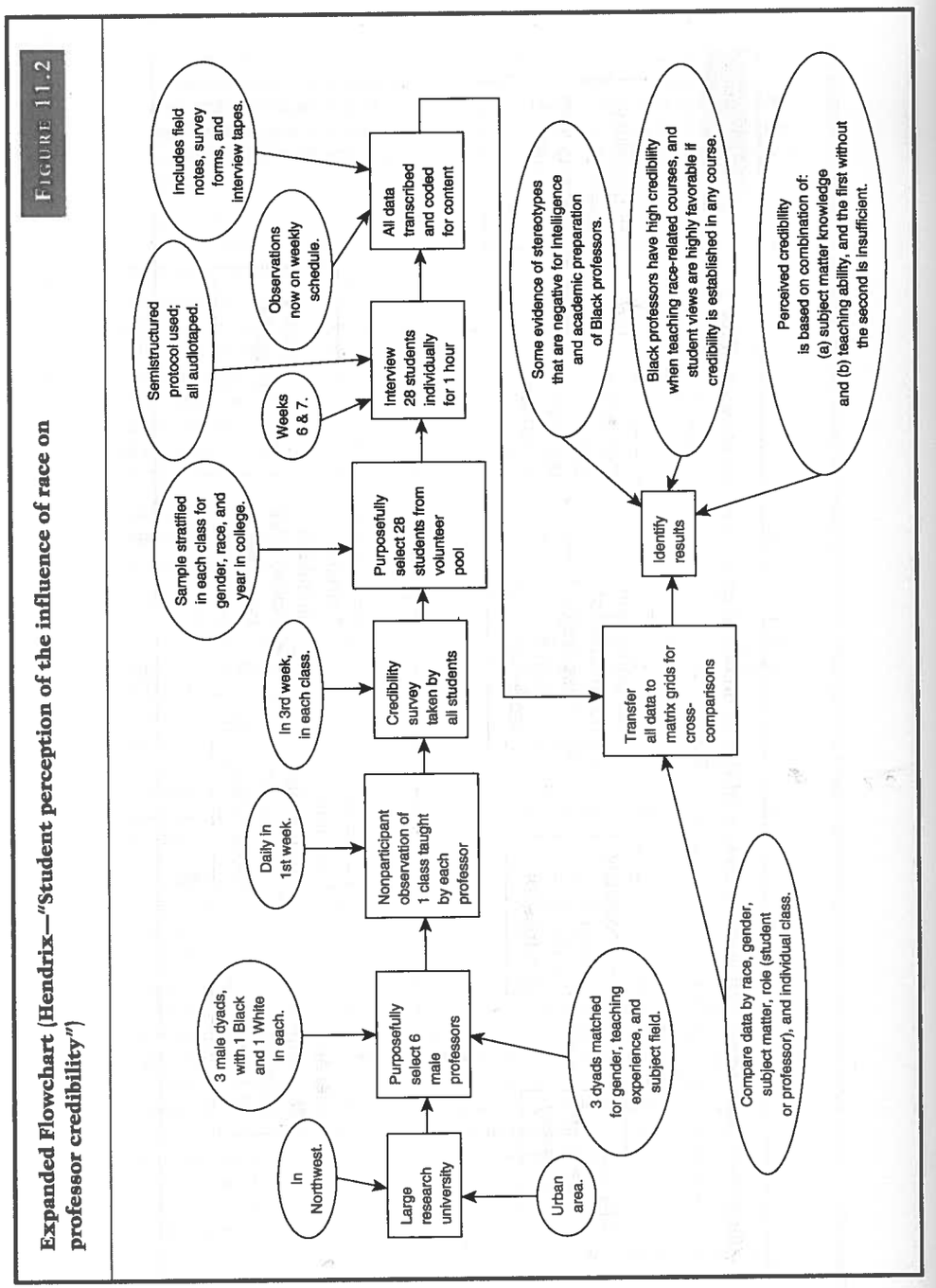

FIGURE 11.2

Expanded Flowchart (Hendrix—"Student perception of the influence of race on professor credibility")

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READING REPORTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH—CRITICALLY

Things the Reader Should Expect

There are other ways to understand the world than those that are implicit in the assumptions underlying quantitative research. Although this book does not deal with the philosophy of science, we already have pointed out that, under the broad rubric of qualitative research, several distinctive traditions for social science inquiry had their origins in an alternative view of the world. When investigators began to examine the world from the vantage point of different assumptions about what is "real" and what constitutes "truth," they were required to invent strategies that were logically consistent with those perspectives. In short, quantitative and qualitative research not only appear different on the surface; they are different at the most profound level as well.

That having been said, this is an appropriate place for us to make a distinction between paradigms and people. Just as there are differing levels of explicit belief and ritual observance within any religion, researchers have different levels of internalization for the assumptions that undergird the kind of research they do. As an example, we know qualitative researchers who seem to experience a world in which "truth" is always a wholly relative phenomenon, but we have other colleagues who find a relativistic vantage point necessary for the conduct of their research—but who appear to comfortably assume a far more standard "scientific" view in their personal lives.

The same is true in reverse for some of the quantitative researchers we know. In everyday life, many act as though social reality exists not "out there" but only in the minds of people and their individual interpretations. In their work, however, they assume that objective knowledge (fact) exists "out there," can be gained by direct experience or observations, and is the only true knowledge available to science. Yes, that indeed leads us to expect researchers to be just as wonderfully inconsistent in their philosophies as the rest of us.

In addition to comprehending the reality of normal human variation, you must understand that a distinctive system of philosophic thought provided the influence that sculpted the outlines of qualitative inquiry. That, too, is a reality, although in this case it is one embedded in history rather than human nature. Thus, when qualitative researchers turn from conducting a study to authoring a report, what they produce will have discernable characteristics that are the product of the paradigm that lies behind their mode of study. Exactly the same thing is true for people doing quantitative studies. The two kinds of reports contain differences in appearance and content. And to that we can only say, "Vive la différence!"

Some aspects for sound reporting, of course, are fully shared between qualitative and quantitative studies. After all, clear, lively prose descriptions are appreciated in both genres. Other aspects of the two types of reports only appear to be similar when they actually are not. Writing about "generalizability" of findings in a quantitative report and writing about the "transferability" of findings in a qualitative report sound vaguely as though they represent the same task, but in some important ways they do not. Finally, yet other aspects of qualitative reporting have no equivalent at all in accounts of quantitative investigation. For example, explaining how the researcher's subjective responses were monitored and managed as part of data analysis is not likely to arise as an issue in describing the selection and operation of a statistical program for numeric data.

Not only will qualitative reports themselves look different to the reader, but, in addition, what we have to suggest about reading them critically will have to assume a form that is different from our treatment of quantitative reports in Chapter 9. The reasons for that arise from several closely related sources.

The most obvious and distinctive characteristic of all qualitative research designs is that they are flexible. Regardless of the particular tradition at hand, qualitative studies are intended to be adjusted not only to the particular nature of the context for inquiry but also to the surprises (opportunities and dead ends) exposed by direct and spontaneous interactions between researchers and participants. As with any unscripted human interaction, the process of gathering data rarely fails to turn up the unexpected. It follows, then, that, when one speaks of a "design" for qualitative research, the referent often resembles an evolving set of questions and responsive tactics rather than the execution of a fixed plan.

That flexibility makes it impossible to devise a single and immutable list of characteristics for sound qualitative studies—even for those within a single tradition (such as ethnography, case study, or phenomenology). And what is true of qualitative studies must then also be true of what we can expect from good reports of these studies. Their variability is high, and the utility of standardized textbook templates is low.

There are a number of permutations within the family of "experiments" in quantitative research. Further, adventitious adaptations that serve to get the job done are just as much a tradition among experimenters as among ethnographers. For these reasons, not all reports of quantitative research assume the same form. Nevertheless, there are templates for most of the commonly used quantitative designs, and investigators tend not to stray far beyond them without good reason to do so.

You will find that quantitative studies follow rules that are neither rigid nor mechanically prescriptive. You will also find, however, that the possibilities have been laid out with considerable formality and careful detail. For a true experiment (defined in Chapter 6), for example, it is not difficult even for a novice to tell whether or not the content of a report makes it perfectly clear that all the standards for a true experiment have been met.

Such templates for design and execution simply do not exist for qualitative studies. If they did, the list of criteria would be longer than you could read and, very likely, far longer than we would have the patience to write.

Beyond inherent flexibility and the absence of standard templates, several additional facts add complications to qualitative reports. Modern forms of qualitative study are more diverse, less standardized, more vigorously disputed by scholars, and profoundly more complicated than comparable forms of inquiry that make use of quantitative data. In short, the domain of qualitative research is more difficult to describe and its content more elusive to grasp than what you will find in the well-established and relatively more stable domain of quantitative science.

At first, such an assertion about the relative complexities of qualitative and quantitative research might seem counterintuitive for many of our readers. In most cases, however, people are confusing statistics, with all of their highly technical and sometimes impenetrable mystery, with the underlying structure of quantitative designs. After statistics are set aside as no more than what they really are—mechanical tools for data analysis that are not at all integral to the internal logic of research—the majority of quantitative studies are easy to understand. The assumptions on which the research experiment is built, for example, are grounded in our everyday experience, and the logic for the basic design is wonderfully self-evident after it has been properly explained. (For a convincing example of such "obviousness" in quantitative designs, see Patten, 2009.) In contrast, the assumptions made by qualitative researchers are not at all commonplace, and the logic of various designs has to be argued rather than simply revealed.

The end result of such complexity is that we have to be exceedingly careful in positing a list of critical questions to raise about qualitative studies and their contingent reports. If misused as though they were simple templates, our suggestions for evaluating what you find in qualitative research reports will be worse than merely a potential source of confusion or error. If taken as a list of what to expect in every report, our suggestions will endanger any chance you have of developing a useful degree of confidence in figuring out how much you trust what the author has written. Apply these standards gently, expect a great deal of variability in what the investigators do, and pay attention to your own common sense—as well as to our suggestions for what should be noticed with a critical eye.

A final reminder here is aimed at a common source of confusion. In your own thinking (and talking) about research, be sure to make a clear distinction between methods of data collection and the underlying paradigmatic assumptions that frame empirical studies. Methods are tools, but the use of a given tool does not posit (or require) any particular set of assumptions about the world. Thus, if interviews are used as part

of a quantitative study, the investigation can remain firmly grounded on typical quantitative assumptions. In reverse, if it is useful to accumulate some numeric data as part of a qualitative design (and such occasionally is the case), the investigator will, nonetheless, continue to employ a set of assumptions that come from a qualitative perspective. In short, you should not be surprised to find quantitative studies in which the investigator records what subjects say or qualitative studies in which quantities (and, not uncommonly, descriptive statistics) constitute a valuable part of the data set.

Another place where you might encounter such "crossing over" of methodologies is in reports from studies that utilize hybrid formats called *mixed methodology designs*. Research of this type was briefly introduced in Chapter 10, along with an illustrative specimen. These investigations purport to utilize both qualitative and quantitative perspectives for the analysis of data. We do not feel it appropriate (or necessary) to explain such sophisticated models in an introductory text. If you are curious about these increasingly common formats for inquiry, however, the texts by Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998, 2003) and Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) are a comprehensive source, but Creswell (2009) and Robson (2002) offer plain-language introductions that might be more appropriate.

EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITATIVE REPORTS: THE GENERIC AND GENERAL STANDARDS

Here are some things to watch for in qualitative reports. They are general in the sense that each pertains to what you should expect to learn from a large component part of the report, but they do not prescribe exactly how that should be accomplished. They are generic in the sense that all of them appear in student textbooks and reference sources that deal with qualitative research. In these sources, they are sometimes organized into lists (or even into tables), whereas in other places they are embedded in chapter-length text. Allowing for differences in length, order, format, wording, and degree of explicitness, however, they all pertain to the same set of broadly stated and widely shared concerns. All that we have contributed is the translation service required to make them readily accessible to our readers.

For examples of how introductory-level textbooks describe the form and content of basic qualitative reports, we suggest any (or several) of the

following: Bogdan and Biklen (2007), Creswell (2007), Merriam (1998), Miles and Huberman (1994), Patton (2001), Robson (2002), or Silverman (2007). If you would like to see actual reports that meet most (if not all) of these generic standards, an efficient tactic is to consult edited research collections in which the qualitative reports selected for inclusion have been carefully screened. For that purpose we suggest any (or several) of the collections noted in Chapter 3. Finally, in the pages of journals and reference collections, the continuing exchange among academics with regard to qualitative research has produced some useful implications for evaluating qualitative research reports. Many of these articles and chapters are not accessible for laypersons, but we can recommend several that would be both truly helpful and not unreasonably difficult: Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner (1995); Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002); Creswell and Miller (2000); Johnson (1997); and Krefting (1991). These sources offer perspectives on what constitutes quality in qualitative research from a variety of professional areas, including occupational therapy, education, marriage and family services, and nursing.

In reading any published report of a qualitative study:

1. *You should find a description of the provenance of the study and what it is about.* Somewhere—and better early than late—the report should describe what the study is about. This description should include an account of what provided the impulse for the investigation, the origin of the researcher's interest or concern, what shaped the initial question(s), what facts might make the findings significant, and why a qualitative format for study was selected. The information might be offered in a single section or be scattered throughout a discursive introduction.

2. *You should find a description of the context in which the data were collected.* This might include social, economic, physical, and, when relevant, historical aspects of the locale. This description will answer the question "Where?"—although much more than geography and physical circumstance is likely to be involved.

3. *You should find an account of what was done in that context.* Ordinarily, this should include answers to the standard questions: "Who?" "What?" "When?" "How?" and, particularly, "Why?" The topics circumscribed by these questions cover the unfolding story of design, method for data collection, and procedures for analysis of the data. Because many qualitative studies involve responses and adjustments to the data while they are being collected (and to the analysis that often runs concurrently with data collection), the account might describe an evolving process rather than a series of fixed and predetermined steps.

For example, if a field study is under way and it becomes apparent that interviews with informants who have one kind of role in an organization (such as a school or hospital) are not providing information about an event or a process that seems vital to the purpose of the study, then informants with a different role and perspective will have to be recruited as participants. A description of why that was done and how it was accomplished must become a part of the report.

4. *You should find presentation of actual data.* The data are usually embedded in the description of what was done and how conclusions were drawn. For reasons of economy, data must be presented in compact and often abbreviated forms, such as selected quotations, short vignettes, diagrams of relationships, or even photographs. Such data displays should be (a) selected to highlight salient features of the data, (b) designed to give vivid color to the setting and participants, and (c) laid out in a manner that allows the reader to consider some of the same evidence that confronted the investigator. In that way, the reader gains insight into how the interpretations were developed and the subsequent conclusions formed—and how well supported by the data they all seem to be.

5. *You should find an explicit effort to summarize, as well as to articulate, one or several conclusions.* The summary might be formal and segregated under a single heading or be woven into the discussion in a closing section. It might include attention to data, analysis, or salient events encountered during the course of the study. The process of asserting conclusions involves a return to the purposes of the study and any explicit questions raised. That task requires two distinct activities: (a) explaining what has been learned from the study by stating what has been concluded from analysis of the data and (b) describing how what has been learned can be fitted into the world of ideas—a world represented sometimes by existing (or proposed) research literature but in other instances by our common notions about how things work.

As is also the case with reports of quantitative research, some (although not all) qualitative researchers go on to include an additional component by noting how the study relates to the world of practice. This might consist of something as explicit as a list of directions for policy or professional action, or it may be as oblique (and modest) as the noting of possible implications derived from the study. Although such a component is not a generally accepted requirement for a complete report, there is no

doubt that many readers find it offers a satisfying kind of closure for the story of a study.

In some respects the structure of qualitative reports differs little from that used for quantitative studies. The fixed elements of title and abstract at one end and references at the other are identical, as is an ubiquitous introductory section (most commonly without a heading). Also, as is recently the trend with quantitative investigators, qualitative researchers now are less inclined to employ an extensive and separate "review of the literature" section and more likely to distribute references to existing research throughout other sections (introduction, theoretical framework, research questions, findings, or even the closing discussion).

Qualitative reports, however, almost always combine data collection and data analysis in a section titled "Method"—for reasons discussed previously in this chapter. Typically, sections called "Findings" (or "Results") and then "Discussion" follow. A heading for "Conclusions" is not uncommon, but the distinctions we have made (in Chapter 11) between findings and conclusions are not always observed. In some reports, the author's discussion of the study might not be clearly demarcated from either the statement of findings or the drawing of conclusions. Finally, although many authors make at least some allusion to the implications of their work (either for future research or for the improvement of practice), it now is relatively rare to find an entire section set aside with the heading "Implications." Out of this discussion, one thing is clear: You should expect the format for reports to be as variable and unpredictable as the underlying flexibility of qualitative inquiry would suggest. General standards for qualitative reports can be useful in detecting serious omissions, but they must accommodate the diversity that is characteristic of real publications.

EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITATIVE REPORTS: THE SPECIFIC AND INDIVIDUAL STANDARDS

We turn now from expectations that are general to ones that are more specific to particular problems encountered in reading reports. Although you can find discussions of each of the following points in almost any qualitative research textbook, these were selected by us (from among many possibilities) for more specific attention. The basis for that selection was our personal experience as readers of qualitative reports and our

conclusion that (a) these problems reflect important threats to a reader's ability to evaluate the quality of a study, (b) these problems are among those most likely to be found in a typical qualitative report, and (c) these problems have characteristics that our readers would be able to both notice and comprehend as elements in good or poor reporting.

Before we begin, however, this is an appropriate place to remind you of several important points. First, remember that, when you detect a flaw in a report, instead of halting and discarding the document, you should usually just make a careful note and then continue—adding this information to the calculus from which you later will extract a sense of how much trust to invest in the products of the study. Second, please do not fall into the trap of assuming that each of the points we raise will apply equally to all forms of qualitative research. The great diversity in approaches to qualitative study inevitably results in great diversity among reports. Our list of concerns was designed for typical reports that appear in mainline research journals. Some qualitative researchers use new writing practices that we have not even attempted to contemplate (see Richardson, 2000, for some vivid examples). We have not tried to invent here the one size that will fit all.

In reports of qualitative research for which the topic is relevant, you should notice:

1. *How much do you learn about the investigator(s) as a person?* If a researcher is the principal "instrument" for inquiry in a qualitative study, to assess the capabilities, dependability, and potential biases of that instrument, we believe that you need to know at least the essentials of its history with the topic, the context, the participants, and the methodology. It is essential here to remember that, in qualitative research, objectivity cannot be achieved by maintaining distance between researcher and participant. Although a degree of neutrality toward the data is what qualitative researchers struggle to sustain, they will be present as human entities throughout every step of the study. It is *absolutely essential* that they recognize their own subjectivity and monitor how that is functioning in the research context. It also is at least desirable that salient parts of that information be shared with the reader.

Under the pressure of space limitations, that desideratum is more violated than observed in what is published. We maintain, however, that you should notice when you are told little or nothing about the primary instrument used in the study—and wonder how that knowledge might have affected your trust.

2. *How often does the report substitute a word or phrase label for an actual description of something done during the study?* This question deals with the sin of nominalism, by which we refer to instances where the author of a qualitative report announces use of a procedure by naming (labeling) the procedure—and then gives no hint about what actually happened in its application. The implication is that, if you are familiar with the procedure named, you will know (more or less) what was done and do not need to read about the messy details. In some cases, that is perfectly legitimate, either because the operation was simple and purely routine ("The list of volunteers was stratified by both gender and marital status") or because the operation indeed was of such length and complexity that the author was forced to depend, in some measure, on the reader's prior knowledge ("The use of grounded theory determined both the strategy of the study and the primary mode of analysis").

Those instances of "naming" and then (perhaps after citation of appropriate reference sources for the uninitiated) moving on with the report are unlikely to be problematic. The following list of procedures that we collected from recent reports, however, includes operations that we believe demand more than a label—but too often are identified only by name and, at most, a brief sentence or two of explication: triangulation, member-checking, purposeful sampling, peer debriefing, identification of emerging themes, search for (or analysis of) negative cases, thick description, prolonged engagement, and participant observation. We are sure you will soon find other examples of such rhetorical sin.

In such instances, we think you have a right to ask questions like "But what happened?" "What did you do?" "What was found?" "How well did it work?" "Where did it come from?" "Could you give me an example?" "How did you define that?" and "Was it worth doing?" When these questions are not answered in the text of the report, you do not know with certainty that anything was done incorrectly in the study. All you do know with certainty is that you do not know! You have been left unable to judge how much trust to invest in the story being told. How many times does that have to occur in a report for you to begin to wonder, "Why is so much detail missing?" The devils of quality in research almost always reside in the details of what was done and why. Nominalism should always make you uneasy—and, used too often or with topics that seem really important, it should make you downright distrustful.

3. *How carefully and openly does the author discuss alternatives to the decisions about design and method taken before and during the study, alternatives to his or her interpretations of the data, and alternatives to the conclusions derived from the findings?* It is an axiom among scholars that thoughtful discussion of rival hypotheses (a collective term covering alternative courses of action as well as other interpretations of data) is a sign of scientific maturity, self-confidence, and a strong sense of ethical responsibility. For us, that description might go a bit too far, but it is certain that, when alternatives are entertained and discussed openly in a qualitative report—along with assertion of the argument(s) favoring the decision or interpretation selected—the reader is left with far more than enhanced respect for the author's person. The reader has in hand information that allows him or her to audit the trail of process in the study, including not only accounts of what happened but answers to questions about "why?" as well. This form of detail is usually the most reassuring when reaching the conclusion that this is a careful study, likely to accurately represent the participants and likely to deserve your trust.

4. *How vivid are the representations of the context, the participants, the researcher(s), and the events of the study?* Clear, forceful, uncomplicated writing produces the power of research reports—quantitative or qualitative. There are, however, some insufficiently appreciated differences in what constitutes effective writing for telling the study's story in the two types of research.

For quantitative reports, it is highly desirable to employ writing that is vivid in description and interesting in style, as well as just plain and transparently clear. For qualitative reports, these characteristics are absolutely essential. Colorful descriptions, portrayals of intense affect, flashes of humor, and vivid sketches of context are at the heart of the investigator's purpose—to make the familiar seem strange and exotic and the strange seem comfortably familiar. For that to be accomplished requires that the people seem alive, that the story of what is happening to them seems worth hearing, and that the insights gained into the human condition seem sharply defined and fully believable.

No, this is not an appeal for flashy writing to take the place of rigor or for personal journalism to displace thorough description in qualitative reports. This is a judgment based upon how you respond to what you read. If you find the people and places of the study uninteresting and lifeless or if the study has no power over your thoughts and imagination (even if only for the time it takes to read the report), then we think the report has failed in one vital respect. And how will you make that evaluative judgment about a report? Read it, and you will know! The quick and the dead will always be with us, but nothing is so deadly as a boring research report.

EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITATIVE STUDIES: A CRITICAL LOOK BEHIND THE REPORT

Some of you may have noticed that we have tried (perhaps *struggled* is a more accurate description) to keep this section focused on *reports* of qualitative research and how to read them with a critical eye for their adequacy. It is inevitable, however, that in thinking and writing about reports one slips easily into contemplation of the studies behind them—and how adequate they might be. The two foci are different but so intertwined that it is difficult to keep them separate.

The simple fact remains that, while writing this chapter, we often found ourselves considering how reports serve to reveal important (and sometimes ubiquitous) problems in the actual conduct of research. For that reason, we feel our task in this chapter would be incomplete if we did not share a few of the most insistent concerns that often draw our attention away from qualitative reports as documents—to the decisions and procedures of the studies themselves.

There is a wonderful cinematic moment near the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939) when Toto has knocked the screen aside to reveal the Wizard, frantically manipulating the machinery to produce what is visible. In a moment of panic at being revealed, he says: "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!" Contrary to the Wizard's injunction, we are inviting you to take a brief look at five pieces of the research machinery that always lurk behind the paper pages of qualitative research reports.

The Machinery of Time

We think that some qualitative researchers do not spend enough time in the contexts and with the participants they purport to examine. There is no rule about this, not even a useful rule of thumb. In the end, however, the believability of a qualitative study depends upon our sense that the investigator got close enough to the data sources to be really familiar with what was going on. We want to be reassured that he or she was unlikely to be taken in by devious participants, was unlikely to distort descriptions because important aspects simply were overlooked, and was unlikely to have fastened onto the first interpretation that popped into mind, without listening and watching until something beyond the merely facile came into focus. All that takes time, repeated opportunities, and long contemplation of data.

There are, of course, compelling motives to be efficient in the use of valuable research time, but that is only an explanation for why data collection sometimes gets rushed—not a valid excuse for superficial work. We look in research reports for evidence that the investigator was able to "be there." This holds true even in studies for which interviews are a method of data collection, when "being there" consists of taking the time required to truly engage the participants, to listen closely, and to probe thoughtfully. In doing so, we always hope to come away with a sense that the pace of process within the study allowed the researcher to acquire enough intimacy to serve as a reliable guide. Too often we are disappointed, and our concern is that the problem lies not in the reporting but in the doing. When you finish reading a qualitative report, ask yourself, "Am I convinced that the author stayed long enough to give me a really trustworthy account of what was going on?"

The Machinery of Subjectivity

Understandably, all researchers bring to the work of an investigation the freight of who they are, what they know, where they have lived, how they think, and why they are doing the study. What is less well understood is how important it is for them to (a) be aware of the content of that freight; (b) be watchful about how their unique subjectivity interacts with decisions about questions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation; (c) be firm and creative in devising ways to step back and allow the data to be what they are; (d) be diligent about keeping a careful record of subjective encounters within the study; and (e) be open and artful about sharing that record in the report.

After all, the researcher is the one who, with all of his or her humanity, serves as the primary instrument in all that transpires. How subjectivity is managed really matters (it can never be eliminated; nor should we wish it to be)—it must be dealt with by deliberate actions, not by confessional contrition, and it has consequences for both the quality of data and the believability of the story told in the report. We always look for evidence that researchers are concerned about their biases and that they have struggled to be aware of where those dispositions lie and how they might be at work. Too often, this topic is ignored, or it is briskly pushed aside with brief references to reliability procedures for coding and categorizing of data.

Such checks on consistency are nice and perhaps necessary but certainly not sufficient to satisfy the need to detect and confront researcher bias—or to reassure nervous readers! We would rather read

about answers to questions like "What made me so interested in that?" "Why was I uneasy about this?" "Did my foreshadowed assumption really help in understanding that?" "What made that decision feel so inconsistent with my theoretical framework?" and "Would the participants share my interpretation?" That is the messy stuff of doing qualitative research, and, untidy or not, it must be done with patience, skill, and honesty. When you finish reading a qualitative study, ask yourself, "Am I persuaded that the author was clearly conscious of who he or she is and that, throughout the study, he or she was conscientiously watchful about the intrusion of personal bias into the research process?"

The Machinery of What Does Not Fit

The search for negative data, the analysis of outliers and extreme cases, the creation of explanations for the incongruent products of triangulation, and the disposition of divisive fallout from peer debriefing sessions (all of which are common requirements in a qualitative study) should involve *actually doing things*. It is here that the sins of nominalism run amok! The researcher should think about why exceptions in the data occurred and what they might mean and then actually decide what to do about them. Simply ignoring what does not fit—or just taking cursory notice and moving on without response—represents dangerously inadequate use of qualitative methodology.

When something does not fit with the investigator's preferred understanding, the researcher has to take action, even if (in all honesty and after every effort has been made to find an alternative) that action is simply to recognize that, when people are studied, there are likely to be exceptions to any generally useful rule about their behavior. If the investigator does not respond to contrary data or to clearly visible alternative interpretations, those unexamined loose ends just hang around the study like uninvited ghosts—haunting the party and spoiling everyone's appetite.

To avoid that unhappy condition, we are more concerned about evidence that shows what happened in a study *after* a search for disconfirming cases was undertaken than we are impressed by mere assertions that it was done. When you finish reading a qualitative research report, ask yourself, "Am I persuaded that the author did not sweep anything under the rug (either data or alternative interpretations of the data) but gave everything encountered in the course of the study full and honest consideration?"

The Machinery of Relationships

Everyone knows that what people say to you and how they behave in your company is conditioned in large part by the nature of your relationship. Close friends and casual acquaintances do not exchange the same opinions, stories, jokes, or personal feelings. How you behave with clients or visitors in a professional setting is not how you behave with colleagues. And what happens between a researcher and a participant reflects how each presents himself or herself to the other and how the perception of mutual roles is progressively defined by subsequent interactions. We think it makes an important difference whether researchers elect to present themselves (and then act) as interested visitors, genuine friends, professional colleagues, needy supplicants (common with doctoral students), omniscient scholars (occasional with professorial types), political allies, dispassionate observers, the biological equivalents of a tape recorder, or warmly sympathetic listeners. The list of possibilities goes on, but make no mistake: Each relationship has an effect on what will be collected as data. That puts the interpersonal—and the nature of perceived relationship—at the heart of qualitative inquiry.

We have formed the impression that qualitative researchers and, most particularly, novices in the field are insufficiently attentive to this factor and, by that neglect, certainly appear to be naïve as to its power. We look for evidence that presentation of self is thoughtfully preplanned, carefully monitored, and watchfully shifted when required. Evidence that the researcher is aware of how various "researcher effects" can appear in data and that he or she is concerned when participants seem to be trying too hard to offer information they think the researcher wants to hear tells us that he or she recognizes the potential power of relationships to shape data. When you finish reading a qualitative research report, ask yourself, "Am I now completely clear about the relationships the author tried to establish with the participants, and did those social interactions seem to work for the purpose of completing a sound study?"

The Machinery of Context

Descriptions of context (physical, social, economic, historical) are given in the report and (among other functions) serve to allow the reader to decide about the appropriateness of transferring findings from the study to the reader's own environment. That process is made possible, however, by actions taken before and during the study. A sufficient body of facts and

descriptive detail has to be collected if it is to support a thorough and vivid description of context. If there is any place that effort is well expended to develop what is now trendy to call *thick description*, it is in the area of capturing the surroundings where the action takes place.

So much is explained about the participants by knowing their location—in culture, in social class, in economic strata, in regional geography, in their network of relationships, in the web of local customs, and in the very places where they live. All of this information can provide for the rich contextualization that (at the first level) helps the investigator interpret what is seen and heard, subsequently (at the second level) helps the reader more fully understand what is asserted in the findings and conclusions, and, finally (at the third level), allows assessment of the study's relevance to other contexts.

What we find in journal reports, however, too often looks like something clipped out of the real estate section of our hometown newspaper ("Well-maintained contemporary home in nice locality, near public transportation, and suitable for large family"). Charitably, we would like to assume that the researcher knew (and used) a great deal more information than is offered in that sketch—but how can we be sure?

We suspect that the paragraph or two devoted to contextualization in some reports might read like thin stuff because what the researcher actually had bothered to find out was itself thin stuff. We don't expect something of the order produced by Margaret Mead for the islands of the South Pacific, but we do think that some return to the respect awarded to the centrality of "place" in classical ethnography would not itself be out of place. When you finish reading a qualitative research report, ask yourself, "Did I learn enough from reading this report to have a picture in my mind of where the study took place, and does the picture have enough color and detail to let me sense how it might be both like and unlike other places that I know?"

Part IV

READING RESEARCH REVIEWS

This section deals with the reading of research reviews—those reports that focus on synthesizing research on a specific topic. In this one chapter we discuss what a research review is and what does not qualify as a research review. We also provide another 12-step form for staying organized while reading research reviews and have included, as we did with quantitative and qualitative research in Chapters 7 and 11, a completed 12-step form as an example.