

QUESTION FIVE

How Can Qualitative Researchers Produce Work That Is Meaningful Across Time, Space, and Culture?

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What we understand to be “global” is itself constituted within the local; it emanates from very specific agencies, institutions and organizations whose processes can be observed first-hand (Michael Burawoy, 2001, p. 151).

Mutual understanding [cannot] be accounted for in terms of either unequivocally shared knowledge of the world or linguistically mediated literal meaning. It becomes . . . actual and reciprocal assumed control of what is meant by what is said and, in some sense, a self-fulfilling faith in a shared world (Ragnar Rommetveit, 1980, p. 109, emphasis in original).

In 2004, I moved from Chicago to the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI) to take a post at the university there. Before I moved, I had visions of swimming in the coral reef during lunch hour and contemplating new research topics while sitting in the shade of the palm trees lining the

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beach on campus. I would be teaching and researching in paradise. Although I had traveled extensively before, I had never before worked in a Second World environment. I learned a lot in the first few weeks of being on the island, but perhaps the most surprising moment was when I realized I had completely forgotten about electricity.

I lived just above the sea cliffs on the remote northern side of the island, where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean. One day during hurricane season the power went out for several hours. A major storm was brewing; in the eerily dark afternoon, I had my cordless phone, a mobile phone with no service signal, a laptop, and several e-mail addresses. None of these, including the URL addresses to streaming online radio, helped me figure out how bad the storm was or how long the power outage would last. All my tools required an external power source that was no longer available.

That afternoon, looking past the pile of useless gadgets toward the swiftly darkening storm clouds, I realized three important things about myself and my research: My everyday behaviors were developed in a cultural context of ready access to basic goods and services, my modes of communication were overly dependent on electronic technologies, and my working theories about new technologies for communication were embedded in invisible infrastructures of privilege. As a middle-class white mainlander American academic, I enjoyed the luxury of taking for granted the existence of such a mundane thing as electricity.

This was going to really mess up the tidy categories of my academic and social life. I had to rethink everything. How could I have forgotten that I was no longer living in a First World environment?

My only exposure to internet use in the Caribbean had been Miller and Slater's (2000) study of Trinidad. As an internet researcher in the Virgin Islands, I soon realized that I cared about and was attached to the internet far more than anyone else. On the islands, the internet is useful but not indispensable. Radio is much more ubiquitous and central to everyday life, because its transmission survives when the power—or the money—is gone. These islands have the highest cost of living as well as the lowest average income in the United States. Those with money can afford to pay the high monopoly prices for connectivity. For the vast majority of people, however, broadband (much less internet) is not even tenth on their list of needs.

When technologies fail economically because of a lack of money or physically (and the question on the islands is when, not if, they will fail), the residents' very palpable struggle to survive continues. For many, life is lived close to the bone.

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In 1995, when Hurricane Marilyn hit St. Thomas, USVI, it wasn't the biggest news on the mainland United States, but to the local population it was devastating. In addition to the immediate physical destruction of property, the infrastructure crumbled. Although some people had electricity and running water in a matter of weeks (not unexpectedly, those with money and connections), others waited more than nine months (read: Nine months?!) for those basics. Certainly, life without running water, refrigeration, or adequate communication systems might describe everyday life in many places around the world, but surely not here, in this U.S. Protectorate, proclaimed to be "Paradise" and acknowledged as the #1 cruise ship destination in the Caribbean.

The same year, but worlds away, I was living in an insulated college town in the Midwest, learning that all academic inquiry necessarily involves abstraction. Almost immediately on turning our analytical gaze to examine a phenomenon, we extract it from its context. We study phenomena (and in qualitative inquiry, this is often *in situ*), we capture particular moments as snapshots, we package and present our findings in a mode suitable to our target audiences. The product of our research is several times removed from experience.

Scholars have long discussed the concept of being "situated," though feminist scholars brought this concept to the foreground of social inquiry in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ Laying out powerful critiques of the ethnocentric, patriarchal, and colonialist traditions in the practice of science and the production of knowledge, scholars across disciplines called for more direct attention to the identification and/or interrogation of the frames delimiting the processes of inquiry, as well as the social, economic, geographic, cultural, racial, and gendered position of the researcher.

What I didn't comprehend at the time I was first exploring these stances in qualitative inquiry was the extent to which each of us is situated in a particular locale as well as point of view. Our theories about how the world works are bounded by invisible frames, built not only from our disciplinary training but also from our position, as described above. I had *thought* that I was conducting interdisciplinary, multi-sited, even "global" qualitative research of the internet. I had been well trained in the methods of interpretive sociology, in negotiating my own voice within multiple perspectives and situating my work. Yet all of my premises, all my reactions to stimuli in the field, all my interpretations of discursive behaviors, and even all my frames for writing seemed still locked within some powerful and, more importantly, invisible structures for sense-making.

No matter how much I had strived to reveal the frames influencing my life and work over the years, I had still forgotten about electricity. There is often, if not always, a disconnect between the idyllic paradises of tourist brochures and the realities of Second or Third World living. Likewise, there are disconnects between our imagined lives as reflexive researchers and the extent to which we are one of the "Others" of our research projects.

I glibly entered into a new cultural context in 2004, dreaming of white sand beaches and snorkeling during my lunch hour. Each day brought a new definition to and sobering reality about where I had chosen to live. But I only truly identified the cultural presuppositions I had used to conduct internet research when I faced my useless technologies in a storm and bemoaned my inability to *do* much of anything except hope that my accidental supplies of peanut butter (which I had obtained without realizing they were a perfect food choice for emergencies) would allow me to ride it out.²

This experience may seem tangential to the topic of qualitative internet research, but it speaks to what, for me as an interpretive ethnographer, lies at the heart of the question of this chapter: Is it possible to make one's research more global and meaningful across time and cultural boundaries? Even if it is possible to do so, and I argue it is not, should this even be a useful goal? This dire-sounding response to the question of the chapter is not meant to deter us from our efforts, but is intended rather to emphasize that our research theories, methods, and interpretations are bounded by particular and situated rationalities. We live, conduct research, and find meaning from particular positions. As researchers, our understanding of others is limited by unnoticed frames of reference. Thus, when it comes to the global phenomenon of the internet, social researchers must remain cognizant that global scale does not inherently yield shared understanding. The best we can hope for is a shared *faith* that our experiences have common ground or our research findings can be comparable. Featherstone and Venn note that because of digitalization and globalization, "we have to abandon many of the [Western] universalistic assumptions, for example about linear temporality and progress, and instead start from a perspective which emphasizes global *variability*, global *connectivity*, and global *intercommunication*" (2006, p. 2, emphasis in original). Even so, as Burawoy notes in the quote beginning this chapter, understanding, sense-making, and cultural meaning are all constituted within the local, and as qualitative researchers, that is fundamentally where we are situated.

In this chapter, I focus on the concept "global" and discuss the ways in which building reflexivity into one's research design can help situate one's work, internally and externally. By "research" I mean both

the process and product of inquiry. By “situated” I mean located in a particular historical, local, and political place. By “internally and externally,” I mean to include those factors influencing the design, process, and write-up of the study, as well as those elements that link the specific study to larger contexts of meaning, whether physical, theoretical, or cultural. By “reflexive processes” I mean the method of looking recursively and critically at the self in relation to the object, context, and process of inquiry. In a crass sense, this is less like looking in a mirror and more like trying to look at yourself looking in the mirror (for more elegant treatments of this concept, see Ashmore, 1989; Lynch, 2000; or Woolgar, 1988).

❖ QUALITATIVE INTERNET RESEARCH:
A LOCAL AND GLOBAL ACTIVITY

At least in the United States, new communication technologies—including the internet—are decidedly among the hottest areas of study in the social sciences and humanities disciplines. Even after a decade of exponential growth of these areas of research, there is still the alluring opportunity to study something that nobody has studied before, to develop new theories, and to access and use amazing technologies in one’s research.

In this environment of swift, global transformations and marked shifts in disciplinary attention, it is vital to remain firmly rooted in and aware of the local—not just because all objects of inquiry are localized but also because it is only by examining one’s local premises, situated in a physical locale and saturated with certain particularities, that one can hope to recognize how one’s work is situated in larger contexts.

I take communication and information technologies to be subsumed within the concept of the global, because they are the means by which we are more able to conceptualize and concern ourselves with “the global.” Arguably, all internet use is local, but unless it happens within the same room among members of the same kinship group, it occurs within and constitutes the global. It behooves us to consider, then, what the term might entail. I find myself asking three questions:

1. What does the term “global” mean, anyway?
2. How can qualitative methods be used to address global concerns?
3. How can qualitative researchers produce research that is meaningful and relevant to a global audience?

It may be risky to perpetuate a binary distinction between the terms “local” and “global,” because lived experience in a media-saturated world seems to meld together into a hybrid, the “glocal” (see Kraidy, 1999, for a clear articulation of this term). However, it is useful to retain the distinction for purposes of focusing less on how people in general experience this hybrid existence and more on how qualitative researchers have approached social phenomena, using particular (situated) procedures to define the parameters of the field, collect information, apply theoretical and analytical lenses in the interpretive process, and write research reports.

For example, globalizing trends as well as media attention to the term “global” encourage researchers to conduct studies based on global datasets, use global frameworks, or speak to a global audience. Yet, social problems themselves, which help us identify topics for research, always occur at the local level. It is at the local level where qualitative research contributes a wealth of possibilities, because it is uniquely developed to grapple with in-depth study of the individual case.

Given this, one might ask, Can qualitative research be global? This question is interesting because it immediately raises the a priori questions of whether or not qualitative research can be conducted on a global *scale* or in a global *manner*, which lead us in decidedly different directions. Another way to get at the difference is to ask this question: Does the term “global” refer to the dataset collected, the author’s mindset, the applicability or generalizability of findings, or the audience of the work? These are key questions to address, individually and in tandem.

A related but less explored way to approach this issue is to look at the other side of the same coin: What does it mean to be local? Does the term “local” refer to the physical location of the object of study or the proximity of the researcher to this object, the theoretical situation (standpoint and/or historicity) of the researcher, or the closeness of connection or fit between the researcher and the researched?

Exploring each of the multiple definitional delimiters mentioned in the previous two paragraphs is a useful exercise while recalling that, in practice, these elements are intertwined. This exploration in turn can remind us of the complexity of the process of conducting internet research in and of global contexts.

❖ OPERATIONALIZING THE TERM “GLOBAL”

Considerable caution should be used when tossing around the term “global.” As has been remarked about general systems theory, this

term encompasses everything and therefore explains nothing. “Global” and other related terms such as “globalizing” or “globalization” encompass so much that they have little definitional value alone, without significant qualification. In this section, I complicate the definition of the term to demonstrate the value of its exploration.

The internet is certainly globally distributed, which without clarification can seem to imply that it is a universal or monolithic technology available everywhere to everyone. Naïve application of this premise leads to oversimplification of technologies that are, in actuality, *differentially* distributed and have different meanings in different global contexts. Even as this premise is laid out, it assumes what it seeks to critique: the unproblematic use of the phrase “global contexts.” What is a global context? The term is terribly vague, based on a presumed but unclarified understanding of “global.” Is it a verb, noun, adverb, or adjective? An object, subject, or predicate? Process, product, or epoch? Or just a broader categorical code word for “Other,” used mostly by Westerners? Of course it can be any of these things, but if it remains undefined in published accounts using the term, the term loses power, even as it enables, often usefully, the illusion of shared understanding through its ambiguity.³

Before one can consider how to be “more global” in one’s research, one must determine what that term actually means in the specific context of one’s research project. I present in this section some possible operational definitions, but the researcher should look beyond these definitions. A simple Google search for “define: global” yields a dizzying array of meanings, each of which is legitimate and, in practice, should be operationalized carefully, continuously problematized in the course of research, and spelled out for readers.⁴

Global can provide a shorthand way of describing anything beyond the local, anything other than the singular, anything beyond one’s own scope of knowing.

Global can be a generalization of or to the whole (planet, typically), generalized to include not just all noted locations but those unnoted as well, in much the same way that sampling techniques are used to generalize to entire population groups.

Global can be a unit of measure, whether it seeks to encompass the entirety described earlier or not. In this way, researchers can discuss the global nature of their data.

Global, when used in relationship to “globalization” can be usefully conceptualized as an *effort* or, from another perspective, as an

effect.⁴ Certainly, there are many efforts toward large-scale (global) homogenization or unification on some front. One can note such entities as the WTO, such companies as McDonalds, or even the operation of such concepts as democracy when beginning to think about this notion (these topics have been well developed by a range of scholars too numerous to mention here). Shifting one's vantage point from production to consumption or from mainstream to margins, these same examples can be used to illustrate globalization as an effect.

When discussed in the context of the internet as an information network, one might focus on "global" as a capacity. From one angle in the prism (as Kendall discusses in Chapter 1), the internet provides people with access to the same information resources from many points on the planet, or multiple information resources from a single point. Shifting the prism slightly enables another operationalization of the concept: The seemingly limitless and, more important, all-encompassing capacity of the internet promotes the illusion that access to this *entirety* of information yields knowledge and sometimes even power; this illusion is founded on the faulty notions that access equals use and transmission equals understanding.

When discussed in the context of the internet as a place, "global" can mean, among other things, distributed (not physically centralized) cultural units, unified and homogeneous (as implied in the colloquial English usage of McLuhan's term "global village") or independent and isolated nodes of special interest.

The definitions of the term "global" are endless. Identifying one's predispositions and frames, whether in relation to this term or to others, is an essential methodological move that enables one to reflexively choose what is relevant and meaningful to the specific study, as well as what is equally plausible but not chosen as a frame or path.

If one is not explicitly studying global internet issues or conducting inquiry from a "global" perspective, why is it important to engage in reflexivity about the term? Arguably, it is increasingly necessary as one's network of study participants, colleagues, and readers become more widespread and diverse because of internet-based communication technologies, crossing occupational, disciplinary, national, and, clearly, cultural boundaries.

To inject a note of caution—it is important to remember that in the iterative, nonlinear process of qualitative research, questions about the global character of one's inquiry might be more satisfactorily

addressed retrospectively, rather than a priori. This is not always the case, of course, but dwelling on the global can lead one too swiftly away from the concrete into the abstract. Qualitative inquiry enables us to focus on the detailed local level, shifting from the forest to the trees in an iterative fashion. Any study of communication and information technology will be simultaneously local and global, but the power of qualitative approaches is most aptly realized at the local level.

❖ GLOBAL AS THE MANNER VERSUS SCOPE OF RESEARCH

Let us return to a question posed earlier in this chapter: *When does one's work become global?* At the beginning of the project, when the research is being designed? In the conduct of the study, which is at a global scale? In the analysis, which may be using global rather than local frameworks? Or in the conclusions of the study, when the local and the global are compared or otherwise connected? Arguably, these are not the most useful questions. Although the term "global" might imply a planet-wide field site for research or the application of universal principles in the interpretation of social behavior, qualitative research methods are designed and best suited for close analysis of the local. The term "global" gains more usability when applied as a guide for one's sensibilities rather than for one's scope.

Whether one follows the people, the object, the metaphor, the conflict, or the story line, the use, influence, production, and effects of the internet are not homogeneous and ubiquitous, but instead specific and concrete. Local experience is always the object of analysis. How one makes sense of it, on the other hand, is a situated act that can enact more global sensibilities. For instance, Michael Burawoy's multi-authored collection *Global Ethnography* (2000) illustrates excellent comparative interpretations across population groups or shifting locales. In some cases, data were collected in more than one context, which means those studies were multi-sited, but they are not global in the sense of encompassing the entire globe. In other cases, researchers apply multiple perspectives from different cultural understandings to interpret data. I take this to mean (and I believe Dr. Burawoy and the other authors of chapters in this collection would agree) that the interpretation is multi- or poly-vocal, but not that there was some sort of universal, global perspective. Miller and Slater's *Internet Ethnography* (2000), is often categorized as an illustration of global ethnography, when in fact, it is an intensively localized study of the use of globally accessible media (albeit in two primary locales, London and Trinidad). Likewise,

George Marcus's (1998) writings on "multi-sited ethnography" are often interpreted as discussions of global inquiry but, when read closely, are more reflective of the need, in an era of globalizing media, to connect the local to the global and to allow boundaries of the field to be emergent and fluid rather than predetermined and unnecessarily restricted, as was natural in traditional ethnographies.

I oversimplify these works not because they are simple but to point out that, on close inspection, key advocates of global ethnography are actually arguing for close, local work that incorporates global sensibilities, not work that is global in scale. This is not a simple task for most of us. The notion of "having global sensibilities" may be difficult to comprehend, much less enact. Our interpretive lenses generally focus at the close level of discourse. Although we may be trained to shift our lens from the empirical to the abstract or theoretical, our gaze to the extant edges of the forest stops at the limits of our own situated, local imaginations. So, although the local context is never disconnected from larger contexts, it is impossible to think at global scales. The interpretive frame of the researcher is trained to work inductively. This approach requires sensitivity not only to the context we're studying but also sensitivity to ourselves as objects foreign to the world around us, both in the context we're studying and outside it, in the rest of the world.

Being global, then, is not a matter of developing a larger range or scale; this goal is incommensurate with the general principle of qualitative inquiry that seeks depth within case, rather than generalization across cases. Given the primary strength of qualitative research as studying human social behavior using close, inductive interpretive methods, it is appropriate to strive to approach research in a more global manner.

❖ REFLEXIVITY: A METHOD OF FINDING THE LOCAL(E) SO AS TO PLACE IT WITHIN THE GLOBAL

How do we understand ourselves beyond our personal experience in order to understand our orientation to the world? How can we become, as Bauman (2005) describes, nomads making our homes at the crossroads of culture? Being saturated with global stimuli does not necessarily allow us to truly know some sort of "Otherness" outside our local context, nor will it grant us a global orientation. Even if it did, this saturation is not an equal transfer, as privilege, politics, and even media habits determine the extent to which one has access to multiple

perspectives and can reflexively incorporate them into one's research practice.

To even begin to think "outside the box," it is necessary to grapple with the notion that, because we live and work within invisible frameworks, we are to a certain extent foreign to ourselves. For most researchers (indeed for most people), these frameworks are not easily identified, much less acknowledged. Yet, to adopt more global sensibilities, this inwardly directed reflexive inquiry is necessary. Such inquiry is partly a matter of recognizing that the self, the phenomenon, and the research project are all located in particular, small arenas, yet must be woven with or contextualized within other encompassing ecologies that themselves cannot be comprehended or encapsulated. It's a matter of "placing" oneself, which requires the practice of "othering" one's own premises, actions, and interpretive tendencies.

Logistically, reflexivity is a method of gaining greater sensitivity to the local and global contexts, of identifying one's own location, and of establishing a sense of rigor in one's research.⁵ Reflexivity can be practiced in all stages of research.

❖ REFLEXIVITY AS AN ANALYTICAL AND RHETORICAL METHOD

Whether one strives to be global or not, one's research will be read globally by audiences who have varying experiences with and attitudes toward the technologies discussed or used in one's research. So while one should remain closely focused locally, one should be prepared to deal with a global, technologically—as well as otherwise—diverse audience for research reports.⁷ I take this to be initially a *reflexive* and, later, a *rhetorical* challenge. How can I help guide my readers so that they understand my work?

My first challenge is to interrogate my cultural and conceptual frameworks to situate my object of analysis and method of inquiry in relation to other people, places, and things. Later, as I try to convey my interpretations to the world of readers, my challenge is to try to make my work sensible and meaningful to people situated elsewhere, while understanding that "shared understanding" is ultimately impossible in an intercultural or even interpersonal sense. At this impossible juncture, one can only interrogate one's own research premises to a certain degree. Then, one's challenge is to find rhetorically sensitive strategies to help locate these premises for readers. It may involve guiding the

reader through one's reasoning process or providing links from context to theory as a way of mapping the path of one's unique, situated interpretations. Stepping back to the basics, one might begin by considering how one's basic terms might be understood—or not—by someone with a vastly different set of experiences.

Consider these different opportunities for situated reflexivity throughout the research project:

Situate the research question into larger frameworks.

Situate the local context into larger contexts.

Situate the research approach within other approaches and research "camps."

Situate specific procedures within larger sets of assumptions and practices.

Situate decisions among other, alternate choices and paths.

Situate the gendered, racial, classed, affiliated, disciplined self.

Situate the study, as a whole and in its component parts, among larger conversations.

Even if this list is collapsed into a seemingly simpler guideline, such as "Situate the Self and Other (Other as an all-encompassing term involving everything outside the self)," it still constitutes a fairly massive requirement that, if tackled fully, would be laughable in its impossibility.

Attention to this list, at various critical junctures over the course of the study, lends strength to the global quality of one's interpretation. Reflexivity allows one to maintain focus not only on the details of the study but also on the puzzle of how one is making decisions that influence the evolving design of the study. This sort of reflexivity also enables the researcher to situate the lens, the context, and the findings so the work remains relevant even as the technologies change. In this way, research can sustain meaning over time to more global audiences far beyond the local.

Engaging in reflexive self-analysis won't yield some all-encompassing, global, capital "T" truth, but it is extremely productive along with other strategies in building rigor into one's research. Reflexive self-analysis is a part of every phase of the study, from the design to the data collection to the editing and sorting of information, the interpretation process, and the writing.

❖ REFLEXIVITY IN ACTION:
FOCUS ON THE OBJECT OF RESEARCH

Situating the object or context within the larger picture is again a matter of understanding how the locale of the researcher and the researched is placed inside larger and larger systems of meaning as well as geographies. Here, reflexivity can be thought of as a method of meta-analysis, whereby a researcher can analyze his or her working hypotheses (stated or, more important, unconscious), analytical processes, and ongoing conclusions. This process shifts both naturally and deliberately from the empirical to the theoretical and back again in such a way as to include room for an analytical gaze on the self doing the analysis.

A practical method of beginning this process is through writing, using research journals, making sure to date all entries or modifications. Rather than erasing one's previous thoughts, one simply notes new additions or modifications. Noting the dates of each entry can help illustrate how the researcher is changing through the course of the study. During this process, it is useful to ask questions of oneself such as the following:

How do I know that?

So what?

Why did I conclude that?

What led me to that perception?

In the process of attempting to answer these questions, a researcher is constituting the self as an subject of study along with the other objects. These "data" are interrogated through a critical reflexive lens. This process can help one determine how one's research questions are shifting, how one's perceptions are changing, how these changes influence concordant shifts in research questions, etc. One can see that this focus on method is less about "application of procedure" and more about the "rigor of interpretation." Both fall under the category of "method," but are often thought to occur at different stages of research. Rigor of interpretation is far less discussed in methods texts, partly because interpretation is often considered a subjective, individual act of discussing implications or drawing conclusions. Such conceptions can be misleading; the interpretive process begins even before the first

research question is formulated. Because the interpretive process rarely appears in the final research report, its procedural elements remain elusive.⁸

Here, I do not address this issue fully, but provide an example of iterative reflexivity in process. During a collaborative study of Dominican newsgroups with a student, several moments of self-analysis enabled us to refine our analytical lens and identify some of our own foreignness to each other and to the context.

Lesson 1: Even the simplest descriptive details are filtered through the researchers' localized understandings.

In a very early written description of the Dominican newsgroup, the student described the various topics available for conversation. Rather than list all the topics separately she elected to create categories. She did not consider this an interpretive move but a practical way of reducing a long list of hundreds of topics to a manageable number and presenting specific material in the written report that otherwise would be a too-vague mention of "various topics."

This choice was sensible in that it served to organize her thoughts. But in the process, she was formulating categories and themes before having any systematic intent to guide this selection. In this early description, for example, she listed "gay marriage" under the category of "social discussion," and "politics" under "entertainment discussion."

I asked her, "Do you think it makes a difference how you're grouping these topics into these categories?" After reflection, she realized that it made a significant difference, particularly to people outside the Dominican culture who might not understand the specific context that guided her categorization.

I then asked her, "Why did you select these categories for these two topics?" She began to talk about political discussion in Dominica in general, speaking as a Dominican familiar with this environment. She remarked that political discussions in Dominica or among Dominicans were very different from her experience of political discussions in the United States. She noted that her categories for the online discussion boards were based on her opinion of how people in Dominica discuss things in general, when they're not online.

I asked her, "How are you defining entertainment?" She provided a definition that was much different from what I, as an American, expected to hear. Among other things, she said, "Because Dominicans talk about politics more frequently, as part of social encounters, we consider it a form of entertainment."

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"Well, then, how is that different from social discussion?" I asked, and at this point the conversation became too convoluted to retrace here. Suffice it to conclude that we were both struck by the extent to which our definitions differed.

The dialogue helped us recognize the ways that a seemingly practical action of simplifying data into categories was in fact an interpretive act, revealing but also constructing a complex schema of social interaction. Reflexive dialogue helped her identify some invisible aspects of her own perceptions that were influencing the way she characterized others' interactions in her study.

Lesson 2: Our cultural assumptions will influence our interpretation.

At a different juncture in the research project, the student began using gender-specific labels for participants, a move that didn't seem to make sense to me. I asked her how she could identify the gender (biological) of the user. She replied that it was "very straightforward," because "a voice emerged" such that the reader/listener could discern if the user was male or female. Her reasoning, upon questioning, was that the gender roles in Dominican culture are stabilized and people adhere to traditional gender roles. I mentioned an opposing viewpoint: that this internet forum might actually provide one of the few anonymous venues to reject or interrogate pre-assigned gender roles. As she reflected further on her gender assignments, she realized that she was perhaps making hasty decisions based on her own comfort zones and cultural assumptions of uniformity.

Lesson 3: Culturally specific understandings of power and authority influence the interpretive lens.

As we continued to converse over the next two days, the student began to shift her understanding of the environment. Without reading any previous literature about gender in online environments, she modified her interpretation, switching from her original perspective to a new perspective I had mentioned in passing as an alternate explanation.

When we discussed this sudden switch in interpretive lens, she acknowledged that she had allowed my own comment to override her initial, instinctive interpretation. I then asked, "Why did you give up your initial interpretation so readily?"

She replied, "I feel like I need to follow your advice and that I'm not in a position to argue with you." She elaborated that the shift was

almost automatic, because of my expertise in internet studies and my position of power.

"This may be indeed true," I said, "but what if I'm wrong?"

As she paused to consider this question, I added that in both her original interpretations and my counterpoint, we were merely making guesses about gender. We decided, eventually and with a great deal of self-directed irony, that it might be useful to ask the members themselves.

During this conversation, the student expressed discomfort with the idea that I might be wrong and continued to pursue my own line of analysis rather than following her own instincts, even though she was closer to the context and far more familiar with the data. Her reaction made sense to me only because I had been living in the Caribbean for awhile. There, students are taught that to disagree with a teacher is to show great disrespect. The respect for authority and hierarchy made it very difficult for her to disregard a comment that I made in an off-hand manner.

Notably, the focus of the study narrowed solely because we were attending to this "gender role" detail of social life more than other, potentially equally interesting, viable, or relevant details. The research questions changed. A seemingly small point got bigger and more relevant while other plausible paths faded away. This point became an object for further data collection and analysis (which points to the issue of constructing boundaries developed by Hine in Chapter 1).

Although these lessons may seem tangential to the issue of making one's qualitative internet research more globally meaningful, they actually lie at the heart of the matter. Once we begin the process of interrogating our own premises and interpretations as foreign, we can begin to find ways of connecting them with other contexts for understanding.

This reflexive exercise was conducted in oral form with my student. I find that it is also productive if conducted (with or without help from a colleague) in writing, thereby producing a documented trail of perception and a chronological record of the related shifts in the shape of the study, which might involve shifts in the shape of the field site and focus of study.

Clearly, these shifts in research focus can and do happen naturally. One's perceptions change as one becomes more familiar with the field, one meets and talks with people, or one studies the data. These shifts are characteristic of qualitative research, and attempting to actually avoid this tendency marks a more positivist/modernist orientation to research, in which accuracy is predetermined by the method of measurement rather than inductively derived through introspection and modification of method. The power of qualitative methods can be actually limited if

one uses criteria for quality and rigor that are intended for other approaches or if one sticks too rigidly to the study's design as initially planned.

To sustain internal consistency and a good fit between epistemology and method, it is vital to understand and embrace qualitative induction and flexibility; one must understand that research is an ambiguous, messy process that changes constantly until the researcher determines he or she has reached an endpoint. Far from diminishing the quality of the research, this reflexive and messy process lends rigor to the qualitative project. Iterative self-critical writing in research journals is one means of developing reflexive rigor.

❖ REFLEXIVITY IN ACTION: FOCUS ON THE SELF

To make one's work readable by a potentially global audience of people is an impossibility, but if one does not even attempt to connect the local to the global, one's work can remain isolated and foreign to readers. If readers have no signposts to orient themselves within your work, they won't know where you or they are. This is a concern for any writer, but it is particularly important in a global community of internet scholars, each of whom ostensibly studies in the same general arena but comes from a particular standpoint and limitations. As members of that academic community, it is part of our responsibility to provide contextualization for our work.

Locating myself is a process of trying to figure out these issues:

... where I stand

... where I'm coming from

... where I can move from, given where I am,

(which helps me understand more about)

... where I'm not

... and where others have been that I'm not going, but might be relevant to helping me understand where I am

Qualitative approaches assist in this process because they are marked by iterative, reflexive processes. Much can be gained by attending closely to those moments when the analytical gaze shifts from the empirical details to the theoretical big picture. As inquiry cycles through observation, analysis, and interpretation, critical turning

points provide opportunities to engage in reflexive analysis about the fit between the questions and the phenomenon and between method and question, the ways in which answers are emerging, and the context in which the interpretation is taking place. As this process of reflexive inquiry is sustained, arguably one's research becomes more accessible and comprehensible to audiences outside the self, the context of the study, and the discipline within which the study occurs. Hence, it becomes more global (using global here as a manner or attitude of research rather than a scale or unit of measure).

Extricating one's own history is a specific part of this process. In a sense, by doing so one is creating data for further analysis within the context of the study in progress. Far from being self-indulgent, it is a valuable means of identifying one's frames and boundaries and, through reflexive analysis, considering the connections and disconnections that first inform and, later, situate the study.

Self-reflexive writing exercises can be conducted in any number of ways. The activity of laying out one's premises, standpoints, and so forth should be a part of one's research process (and is a formal part of such methods as phenomenology or grounded theory). Having said that, I also maintain that there are varying degrees to which this stuff should show up in the final report. Even when advocated or supported by the general philosophical approach, weaving this information into the research may not be warranted or advisable.⁹ If not understood and therefore handled properly as a method, it can be easily judged as solipsistic.

Still, one might pursue this question: How does this sort of reflexive exercise aid in the process of making research conducted in Finland relevant to people reading it in Japan? Or a study of Dutch community networking relevant to community networking research in any location?

As an exercise within the course of conducting a study, it is aimed at revealing some of the hidden intersections of the self, the local experience of the participants, local history and culture, and scientific inquiry. The outcome of such an exercise is not illustrated above because the example only reflects an initial, externally demonstrable phase of reflexive analysis. This level of detail is often missing in general qualitative method textbooks because it is arduous, messy, and lengthy. The best insights happen outside the texts one might produce in these exercises, so the benefits may not be transmitted in writing.

Another example of this sort of exercise illustrates one way I might begin the process of analyzing the connection (or lack thereof) between my methods of inquiry and possible readers. The exercise helps me identify several possible disconnection points, which through further

analysis I can attempt to bridge by applying various persuasive strategies. I begin by addressing a series of questions:

Why might my work be incomprehensible to someone else?

My perspective is unique to me and not accepted by everyone—or possibly anyone—else. I have mashed together such a mess of methods, I'm not sure my work would be seen as "reliable" or "valid" to others. Further, though I may not like or believe in those terms, they're used all the time to assess my work.

What is my perspective?

I'm an ethnographer conducting research on how users feel about technologies. My activities in the field are informed by my use of and familiarity with interpretive qualitative methods, rhetorical criticism, feminism, and critical theory. I believe that interpretations must be derived from and be supported by discourse collected in situ.

What methods do I tend to use in collecting data?

Interview and participant observation, directly, but research journals, indirectly. I write constantly in my research journal, in which I record both my direct observations and my thoughts about my observations. My bad habits in research journal writing: I tend to spin in reflexive circles until I lose focus on the phenomenon. I can second-guess myself endlessly.

What methods do I use in analyzing data?

As someone who calls herself an ethnographer, I'm sometimes baffled by the fact that the one tool I don't use is ethnography. From my perspective, this term describes a mindset or epistemological approach more than a specific set of interpretive procedures. I find it lacks the procedural specificity required to systematically analyze actual field data.

So what do I use? Initially, I just dump my toolbox upside down and try different approaches. Everything that can be considered as data is at some level "text." Whether it's an interview or an observation, visual or verbal, it can be read and analyzed as text, sometimes more literally than other times.

I borrow heavily from rhetorical criticism methods, because the systematic procedures help organize the data early in the process. I might conduct a metaphor or narrative analysis. I find these methods particularly useful in breaking down the structure of text into thematic categories that can be then further studied, using still other sense-making lenses.

Later in the process I use deconstruction methods, mostly in the way they've been applied in organizational analyses. I pay attention to how stories, arguments, or web sites might be rewritten, how binaries are being displayed, how my own binaries are operating on my analysis.

I generally try to follow grounded theory procedures as these have evolved from original conception, looking for themes and categories, but end up being less systematic than I believe the method warrants.

Sometimes in the back of my mind, I think about conversational analysis, but I am not rigorous in my application of this method as it is practiced in the United States. Rather, I think about the premises of this approach as I pore through interview transcripts and conversations.

I use the idea of genealogy offered by Foucault, looking backward to find a difference that makes a difference. I find Foucault's work to enable a mindset, rather than providing specific procedures, so I tend to use this as a macro level of interpretation, rather than in early stages of close analysis of texts.

After I conduct rough analyses using a range of methods, I settle into a more refined analysis that utilizes a narrower set of tools.

What else might make my work incomprehensible to someone else?

I mix methods from interpretive, postmodern, and critical schools of research. I have potentially inconsistent theoretical grounding if I think there is such a thing as a logical "argument" but also believe in the postmodern premises that reject binary thinking or "one right answer."

I also differentiate between methods for framing the study, methods for collecting data, methods for analyzing data, methods for interpreting, and methods of writing. This can appear messy or incommensurate to others when it actually is not, because I borrow from multiple schools of thought.

Even my definitions of “Qualitative Internet Research” may be completely bizarre to someone else.

Obviously, as mentioned above, this “data” will not make my work immediately comprehensible to the audience. This is just an initial exercise to interrogate the self. The objective of reflexivity as a method is to attempt to understand one’s own framework in relation to other choices one could make, so that one can make well-founded decisions and articulate these to others. Understanding the fit between one’s subject, one’s theoretical frameworks, one’s methods, and other phenomena in other places is a continual, iterative process in the qualitative project, not a beginning or endpoint. Notably reflexivity is often an unconscious process, especially if one is not trained to pay attention to this phase of research. In laying out some of the more visible procedures associated with reflexive writing, I seek not to simplify or standardize, but simply to exemplify one way this activity can occur.

❖ CONCLUSION

I have described one aspect of interpretive methodologies, reflexive situating, as a useful way to better understand where the self and research stand, therefore, how process and product weave together into the larger pattern. Reflexive situating can help facilitate more globally sensitive research, but it is also a keen rhetorical strategy for producing and sharing knowledge. We don’t have the opportunity to engage in one-on-one conversation with all the readers of our research, so we cannot anticipate the innumerable questions posed by a potentially global (unit of measure, here) audience. Yet, we can articulate findings more clearly by addressing some of the questions these unknown readers might ask.

When it comes to pragmatic thinking about how to address the question of this chapter, I advocate going back to the basics; the adroit management of contingencies in the ever-changing internet contexts relies on solid grounding in the practices and principles of social inquiry. As any seasoned qualitative researcher will attest, good qualitative research takes time, trial, and error, regardless of how easy and swift the technologies seem or how quickly research papers seem to flood the market after the release of some new technology for communication.

How well will our studies fit within the larger conversations? The interdisciplinary quality of the field of inquiry means that most researchers will fall short of someone else’s expectations for adequacy

in reviewing previous literatures (excellent criticisms of ahistorical or atheoretical trends are written by Sterne, 2005; Sterne and Leach, 2005; and Carey, 2005). The task of covering one's bases is monumental: Required reading can potentially include all previous studies of internet-related phenomena across multiple disciplines, studies of communication technologies in general (historical and contemporary), as well as attention to discipline-specific literatures. Additionally, to really use the right tool for the job, we ought to have comprehensive knowledge of those methods and practices housed under the increasingly unwieldy and perhaps inappropriate term "qualitative" (see, e.g., Hine, 2005a).

It requires no great leap to realize that one's research will more often than not fail to satisfactorily address even a fraction of those issues, theories, and previous studies relevant to individual readers. This situation therefore requires a keen sensibility to rhetorical strategies, whereby the researcher is able to situate the self and the study. Part of one's methods, then, must include the goal to convey meaning at the crossroads of culture, providing maps and guides for an audience who potentially knows nothing of the method or the criteria used to evaluate quality.

The question of this chapter is interesting because it challenges us to think about our research beyond the narrow confines that are often encouraged if not required by our disciplines. At the same time, because qualitative approaches are most applicable and appropriate to local, detailed study of human social behavior in specific contexts, the question must be critically interrogated. Early in this chapter, I stated that it is impossible to carry meaning across cultural boundaries. This statement is not intended to stymie cross-cultural, globally sensitive research. It is only to remind us that research will always be an abstraction from lived experience—at any level.

Situating one's research is a way of enacting global sensibilities. More specifically, reflexive analysis of one's own boundaries is an ethically powerful way of identifying for the self and for others those limitations and factors influencing one's research choices. Even such an invisible (for me) thing as electricity, for example, influences everyday conceptualizations and uses of the internet, not just for those people in locations where electricity is not guaranteed, but for researchers in privileged and insulated environments.

Thus, beyond the impossibility of operating at a truly global level of scale, there remains the problem that, no matter how global you think your work is, someone else will find a flaw in your thinking, or you might realize these flaws long after the research report is completed.

Such is the nature of the larger academic conversation. It's something to accept and embrace, acknowledging as Clifford Geertz (1973) did, that understanding any social setting is like trying to translate a manuscript that is faded and torn. The outcome will always be partial and incomplete.¹⁰ In this way, reflexivity becomes an essential component of inquiry—not to provide a bird's-eye map of the terrain within which knowledge production occurs, but to provide a glimpse of one local position for others, whose local positions inform our own.

❖ RECOMMENDED READINGS

For a good introduction to and overview of the interpretive turn in qualitative approaches, which grounds and promotes a situated, reflexive stance for researchers, I recommend the collection edited by James Clifford and George Marcus entitled *Writing Culture* (1986). To problematize the concepts further and to approach the issue from a feminist perspective, I recommend the collection, *Women Writing Culture*, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (1995). To further address this issue in ethnography, I recommend Robin Patric Clair's edited volume, *Expressions of Ethnography* (2003).

For specific methodological advice within this general interpretive framework, I often return to the several works by Harry Wolcott (1994, 1999, 2005) and the three (very different) editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Norm Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994, 2000, and 2005).

To understand some of the complexities associated with the concept of "global" in relation to qualitative internet research methods, I recommend Michael Burawoy (2000, 2001), George Marcus (1998, 2005); Marwan Kraidy (1999), and Zygmunt Bauman (2005).

Reflexivity is a huge topic. Michael Lynch (2000) lays out a very useful inventory of reflexive positions with reference to associated disciplines/authors/proponents. The specific connection of reflexivity with epistemological standpoint positioning is well developed by Sandra Harding (1991, 1992). Steve Woolgar (1988) offers another useful place to begin. To see reflexivity built into a discussion of reflexivity as a concept, I often return to Malcolm Ashmore's *The Reflexive Thesis* (1989). To explore how reflexivity has been applied in contemporary ethnographic research, see various studies published in the *Ethnographic Alternatives* series, published by AltaMira Press and edited by Art Bochner and Carolyn Ellis.