QUESTION SIX

What Constitutes Quality in Qualitative Internet Research?

Nancy K. Baym

❖   ❖   ❖

Most of us would find it easier to conduct research if there were a clear set of rules to follow, if we could be assured that the paths of least resistance would be the most fruitful, or if were we guaranteed at least one "aha" moment in which it all fell into place and the right route was revealed. Qualitative research is never going to offer those things. As the writers in this collection show, doing qualitative research well is a matter of finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions. We always make trade-offs in our research choices. The trick is to understand the trade-offs we are making well enough to defend them to others.

The introduction and subsequent chapters and responses show that the internet presents novel challenges to qualitative researchers. In responding to these challenges, many of the scholars included here problematize issues germane to all qualitative research. None of our authors was asked to directly address the question of what made qualitative internet research good, but taken together, their writings offer a number of guidelines. In this concluding chapter, I offer some guidelines for conducting "good" qualitative internet research. To do this I draw on the chapters and responses in this book, my experience conducting and supervising qualitative projects about the internet, and a selection of writers who have been particularly helpful to me as I've learned about and taught the issue of quality in qualitative research.

❖ QUALITATIVE RESEARCHERS MUST CONTINUOUSLY BALANCE TENSIONS

The writers in this collection all discuss their research as a continuous process of decision making in which they must assess and balance what is to be gained and lost with each choice that lies before them. Drawing on the dialogic approach of Mikhael Bakhtin (e.g., 1981, 1986), researchers have described a dialectic approach to relationships that views relational maintenance as a continuous dynamic process of attending to multiple simultaneous contradictory needs (e.g., Baxter, 2007; Baxter & Montgomery, 2007; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). The goal of relational research from this perspective "is not to catalog the definitive set of contractions in personal relationships, but to contribute to the understanding of the processes by which couples create, realize, and deal with dialectical tensions" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 158).

Qualitative research is also a dynamic process in which, on an ongoing basis, researchers must find balance between opposing pulls. This dialectical perspective offers guidance for thinking about research goals and processes. As Montgomery and Baxter suggest, while one could develop typologies of dialectic tensions in qualitative research, each might have merit, yet all would be incomplete. What's important is understanding processes for dealing with these tensions. Nonetheless, identifying particular dialectics at play in particular contexts is extremely informative. Reflecting on what a dialogic approach to methodology might mean, Montgomery and Baxter (1998, p. 172) posit several methodological dialectics, including "rigor and imagination, fact and value, precision and richness, elegance and applicability, and vivication and verification." In this collection, the dialectics that receive the most attention are tidiness vs. messiness, depth and breadth, local and global, and risk (which brings intellectual benefit) and comfort.

One of the most basic tensions to be managed, as Hine draws on Law to discuss in Chapter 1, is the extent to which one develops an approach and interpretation that form a tidy whole in the face of research contexts that always reveal complexity rather than simplicity when examined closely. In a review of my book, *Tune In, Log On*, Wendy Robinson (2001) criticized it for being too much like the neat trim worlds of Jane Austen novels and not dealing adequately with the issues that could have been raised regarding gender, consumerism, and other important matters. I can't disagree (nor can I find comparison to Austen a bad thing). Though I do not think I oversimplified, I certainly did err on the side of neatness over messiness by excluding many relevant potential analyses. This exclusion was also, as I discuss later, an issue of focus. However, by identifying processes through which diverse voices in the group continually constructed their social contexts, I did offer an analysis that opened doors to those complexities rather than rendering them irrelevant.

Related to this tension is the one between breadth and depth (e.g., Hammersley, 1998). There are always tempting ways to expand projects—after all, the more vantage points, the more perspectives on what you're studying. In a time of globalized networked convergence, a study involving the internet can go almost anywhere and still stay on topic. Yet, indefinite expansion is rarely practical and—even if it were more "accurate"—almost always invites more complexity than a researcher can manage. Moreover, the close examination of small things that underpins so many of qualitative research's greatest contributions means that other important things must be left unexplored. As Hine puts it, some questions are always "left dangling." As a practical matter, one has no choice but to bound the project and offer a reasonably tidy interpretation of a modest slice of a research field, sacrificing other interesting and integral routes of study along the way.

When one balances a project to keep it manageable and focused on the kinds of close examination that qualitative research offers, one also faces the inevitable tension between explaining a specific phenomenon under study and offering something to those involved in other contexts in which that phenomenon may be meaningful. How can we bring out the great strengths of qualitative research with close study of the local while offering something of meaning in the countless global contexts of internet use? This issue has often been seen as a problem of "generalizability." For instance, I think my students ask *how many* subjects they need to interview or *how many* observations they must make of *how many* messages in hopes that I will give them an answer (23?) that ensures generalizability. However, from a qualitative perspective, particularly a dialogic one, generalizability is neither relevant nor possible. The goal instead is comparability and the ability to offer analyses that can be coordinated with others (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). The writers in this collection do not argue that findings should offer generalization to other contexts; quite the contrary, they argue that local specificity is essential to making sense of the internet in contemporary life. Yet their work offers insights that are of value outside of the specific context of their study. As Srinivasan puts it in Chapter 5, "Global internet research must consider its trans-national elements without sacrificing local reflexivity" (p. 166).

Another tension the authors in this collection frequently note is between sticking to what is comfortable, easy, and predictable and taking risks that can lead to greater insight. The research paths that offer the most novel insight are those that challenge researchers' ingrained ways of seeing things and the interpretations they build throughout the research process. Intellectual benefits are often accrued through taking practical, intellectual, logistical, and emotional risks, pitting novelty against predictability. In this book, Lally in Chapter 5 advocates for risk, as does boyd, who writes in Chapter 1 about spending time looking at the uncomfortable hate-based areas of Friendster to force herself to see things she could otherwise easily ignore. Kendall writes in Chapter 4 about the ways her interpretations might have been richer had she attended to her own emotional interpretations rather than seeking a more scientific distance from those she studied. To bring one's own emotions and sexuality into the analysis as Kendall and others in this collection advocate is to put one's self at risk in regard not only to one's research subjects but also to an academy that may be increasingly comfortable with the concept of self-reflexivity in research, but whose norms often interpret this degree of personal disclosure as inappropriate irrationality or self-focus, rather than a thoughtful analytic strategy.

Dialectic tensions cannot be made to go away; they can only be managed. The challenge, as Silverman (1989, p. 222) reminds us, is to "avoid choosing between all polar oppositions." "Good dialogic inquiry," write Montgomery and Baxter (1998, p. 173), "should have a both-and rather than an either-or orientation." We need to accept that we will inevitably lose some things regardless of the choices we make and, given that fact, must make considered choices we can articulate to others that guide us toward what we are there to understand.

The remainder of this conclusion turns to what "making considered choices" might mean. I begin with an abstract discussion of whether there can be standards for quality from a dialogic perspective that takes the multiplicity of social meaning as a basic premise. I then move into a more concrete discussion of recommendations. Although the book's focus is ostensibly on internet research, none of the guidelines that emerge regarding quality are specific to that domain. Instead all of us in this volume have found that our internet research quandaries are best solved not by assuming we are facing brand-new situations that call for entirely new approaches, but by assuming we are facing people behaving in styles that call for many of the same ways of thinking that were called for before there was an internet.

❖   CAN THERE BE QUALITY STANDARDS?

Qualitative researchers agree that making wise research choices has never been about distinguishing right from wrong but about finding the most appropriate path given the specific point in the specific project. As Stern puts it in Chapter 3, the best answer is always "it depends." "There are no right or wrong methods," writes Silverman (2005, p. 112); "there are only methods that are appropriate to your research topic and the model with which you are working." Some might take the notion of "no wrong methods" to mean that all methodological choices are equally good. This fresh thinking may facilitate innovative new approaches to qualitative research (some of which work out better than others), but it also provides a wide opening for critics of qualitative methods to challenge the rigor and therefore the value of research claims.

One incentive for putting this book together was Annette's and my sense that too much of the qualitative internet research we read could use a healthy dose of rigor. Silverman, along with Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), are among the qualitative methodologists who argue for the necessity of standards, even as they (and we) run into phenomenological trouble specifying the exact nature or justification for standards. Silverman (2005, p. 15), for instance, argues that "qualitative research should offer no protection from the rigorous, critical standards that should be applied to any enterprise concerned to sort 'fact' from 'fancy.'"

This book's introduction raised several issues that problematize the question of what standards might be applied. We live in a time marked by convergence, mutability, and overlap, which greatly complicates our research objects. When our subjects can be viewed from so many valuable perspectives, all of which are deeply interconnected to one another and each of which is itself ever changing, on what bedrock can our analyses be evaluated? Disciplinary traditions have often provided that foundation, but academic norms and institutions are not immune to the cultural pressures that push us toward multiplicity and relativity. The role of disciplines in setting standards for the evaluation of research in interdisciplinary domains such as internet research is increasingly problematic as our work must be grounded in and speak to multiple traditions.

We argue that the problems of qualitative internet research are fundamentally questions of qualitative methodology, yet as the introduction noted, qualitative methodologists and theorists disagree about the

possibility, let alone specifics, of standards. While Silverman urges us to sort "fact" from "fancy," others reject the premise that there are "facts" that can be discovered or found through inquiry. This disagreement is particularly apparent in a line of interrelated qualitative methodology texts, beginning with the first edition of Denzin and Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), which offered critical and postmodern articulations of qualitative practice that celebrated diverse ways of knowing and questioned any research claims to "truth." Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Silverman (2005) cite that text and, in response, stand by a more postpositivist line that believes in and values notions of reliability and validity. In the second edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), Smith and Deemer (2000, pp. 428–429) critique Hammersley and Atkinson, admonishing readers that "the epistemological project is over and relativism must be accepted. We must change our imageries and metaphors from those of discovery and finding to those of constructing and making." Smith and Deemer do not deny that we make judgments, nor do they argue that we should suspend judgment; rather, they argue that there cannot be predetermined standards for those judgments. In their view, judgment criteria "must be seen as always open-ended, in part unarticulated, and, even when a characteristic is more or less articulated, . . . always and ever subject to constant reinterpretation" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 445).

From a perspective that takes the multiplicity of modern life seriously enough to do away with appeals to a unitary truth as the arbiter of quality, a perspective with which I am sympathetic, the question becomes how can we "make and defend judgments when there can be no appeal to foundations or to something outside of the social processes of knowledge construction" (Smith & Deemer, 2000, p. 438). How can we "honor pluralism and multiplicity while avoiding its excesses?" (p. 452).

If there is no truth, isn't doubt always justified? Can "accurate" be a measure when reality is socially constructed and multiple? Aren't quality standards ultimately decided not by what is closest to truth, but by the norms of the scientific research community? These are excellent questions, but the practical issue remains that even a cursory stroll through the halls of an academic conference-in-progress will convince almost anyone that not all work is equally good. That there is no direct access to truth does not mean that all studies are equally compelling. All of us make judgments based on standards, even if our standards are tacit and open to reformulation.

One path to resolving this philosophical dilemma is to take the phenomenological problem as irresolvable and then to shift the focus

from whether we have really found the true state of things to whether we have built interpretations of affairs that meet our audience's standards for what they will accept as a basis for action. On the one hand this path is circular: Trustworthy research is research that people think is true. On the other hand, operating without knowing for certain that one's standards get to "The Truth" is the basic state of human affairs. We can take heart in Jackson's (1986) claim that every method—even those (experimental and statistical) methods that seem to have truth-claims built into their procedures—is a form of argument. Whether there is a single truth out there to be discovered or multiple truths waiting to be constructed, to be persuasive, researchers must convince readers that "their 'findings' are genuinely based on critical investigation of all their data" (Silverman, 2005, p. 211).

In sum, then, I take a practical approach to thinking about quality in qualitative internet research. Though there are thorny ontological problems one can wrestle with, there are also many moments in qualitative research that call for pragmatic judgments about what to do. We need standards to guide us as we resolve the inherent dialectics in qualitative research; at the same time we should recognize that standards must be flexible and situated and that others may hold other standards (and truths) yet function just as well. Elsewhere (Baym, 2006), I have offered a list of criteria that I believe make for "quality" in qualitative internet research. In an analysis of exemplary qualitative internet studies, I argued that their quality was due to at least six interrelated strengths: (1) they are grounded in theory and data, (2) they demonstrate rigor in data collection and analysis, (3) they use multiple strategies to obtain data, (4) each takes into account the perspective of participants, (5) each demonstrates awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process, and (6) each takes into consideration interconnections between the internet and the life-world within which it is situated.

In what follows, I turn from abstract issues to the concrete, elaborating on these criteria and making others explicit. First, I argue that good work is historically grounded. Second, such work is focused. Third, whatever the ideals, given the focus, work must be judged in terms of what it is practical to accomplish. Fourth, a good researcher gains persuasive ability by anticipating others' counter-arguments and making the arguments for his or her own case explicit. Finally, good qualitative internet research makes its case by providing resonant interpretive frames that help us understand both what is new about new technologies and how research on new technology connects to other areas of inquiry.

❖ CONNECT TO HISTORY

Too often internet researchers take the stance that, since the internet is new, old theory and methods—even those concerning media—have nothing to offer in its exploration. But, as Christians and Carey (1989) advocate, the best internet research attends to earlier scholarship about the internet, about other media, about earlier incarnations of similar social practices, and about methodology, a point echoed by researchers in this volume. Hammersley suggests we would be better served by moving to "a situation where there is less emphasis on the investigation of new phenomena or the generation of new ideas (important as these are) and more on improving existing knowledge" (Hammersley, 1998, p. 121). For internet researchers, this can be a liberating insight. As we argued in the introduction, one can barely keep up with the internet's novelty even if one attends to it daily, let alone within the framework of academic publishing. Furthermore, connecting with historical precedents for the phenomena we study increases the sophistication with which we can think about our topic, expands the breadth of the contexts in which our work can be relevant, and provides a means for readers to integrate what the researcher has to offer into what they may already know.

In Baym (2006), I discussed how Brenda Danet's (2001a) analyses of play in online spaces benefited tremendously from the connections she found with theory and research on the history of typography, aesthetics, and folk art, among other areas. My work with understanding social organization in an online soap-opera discussion group (e.g., Baym, 2000) adapted practice theory as a methodological and analytic approach. Both Lynn Cherny, whose study of a MOO (1999) was one of the earliest internet culture monographs, and I drew on the concept of the "speech community" from the ethnography of communication to make sense of the language practices we were seeing in our online communities. As I wrote in Baym (2006),

> The theories that we have developed to explain social organization need to be able to address new media. Existing theories may not be perfect fits. This is, in fact, a way in which internet research can contribute to social theory as well as enhancing our understanding of the internet. As internet researchers find the ways in which old theory does and doesn't work, we are able to refine and improve social theory. But new technology does not reinvent the social world. Old structures have simply not collapsed and been replaced by new ones in the wake of the internet. (p. 83)

Researchers must disabuse themselves of any notion that, because a research topic involves the internet, there is no need to be grounded in existing literatures, theories, or methods. Analysts learn the most and are most persuasive when they are able to make their contribution clear by articulating the connections between what they have found and what we already know.

❖ FOCUS

Clear grounding in research from other traditions as well as the literature most germane to one's specific topic can also help one fulfill the second guideline, which is to develop a clear focus and stick to it. Projects need "key guiding principles" (see Hine in Chapter 1)—a clear sense of what it is that we are seeking to understand. Messiness is inevitable, but when one starts from a vague beginning, one will never end up with a cogent explanation of that mess. Given that we cannot do it all, we must limit our attentions to a domain small enough that we can examine it with some degree of thoroughness. A researcher's focus will inevitably shift throughout the process, but when we have a grounding in a specific inquiry from the start, it is considerably easier to note when a fascinating sideline is too much of a digression. Furthermore, our focus sets the core standard against which our work will and should be judged: Given what we wanted to know, did we make the choices with the most potential to tell us?

When we are clear on our research objects, goals, questions, and the contexts in which we will situate our interpretation of the research objects, we develop more coherent and focused tales to tell about them. For instance, in her analysis of the MOO she studied, Lori Kendall's consistent focus on the construction of masculinity kept her from veering into areas too far afield, as did Shani Orgad's emergent focus on narrative in breast cancer survivors' internet use (and nonuse). Surely neither knew that this was going to emerge as her core focus, but once both learned enough from their research fields to see the importance and value of those practices, their analyses remained centered on them.

❖ BE PRACTICAL

It is a point too often forgotten, especially by those excited about their work, that we have to work within practical constraints. The internet may make near-infinite piles of data available, and many paths may

lead to fruitful and fascinating interpretations, but we have to make choices or we will never get past data collection. We can only work with what we have the time, capital, personnel, and background to observe and reasonably interpret (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; see Hine, Chapter 1, and Bakardjieva, Chapter 2). It may be desirable, for example, to conduct face-to-face interviews with people one has studied online, but doing so may be prohibitively expensive. There may be more relevant historical material in other disciplines than we can take in and synthesize. We can only resolve tensions within the limits of our circumstances.

We therefore need to think carefully about what we can and cannot do, and plan projects in ways that make the most of the possibilities we have. This planning should happen first and foremost at the point of formulating the research question, so that what we seek to know can be found within the scope of data we can access. Beyond that, it is perfectly legitimate to acknowledge that, while it would have been ideal to, say, visit more research sites, resources precluded the ability to do so. Indeed, if it is believable that it was too onerous to make such visits, that acknowledgment can enhance credibility as it shows that a researcher understood the situation well enough to know what might have elicited better data.

❖ ANTICIPATE COUNTER-ARGUMENTS

The counter-arguments for which qualitative researchers need to be prepared are endless. Among the questions readers may legitimately ask are the following: How do I know this isn't just your opinion? How do I know that you didn't just go in and find what you expected to find? How do I know your examples are representative rather than cherry-picked? How is this different from an anecdote? These are, in essence, truth tests that are applied by lay and academic audiences alike. It is by attending to these kinds of questions throughout the research process that researchers are able to convince others of the value of their work.

Research quality can hence be seen as a rhetorical matter of persuading others by effectively addressing all their potential questions within the research and its presentation. Fortunately, there are good ways to anticipate these arguments, learn what they have to teach, and provide compelling evidence that one is not guilty of such allegations. As I discuss below, researchers can enter the field with an open mind, demonstrated by problematizing core concepts. The limits of data collection and interpretation can be pushed by collecting diverse and contradictory information from members, contexts, and one's self.

Seemingly incommensurable data can be played off against each other to push interpretation. In building interpretations and speculating on their significance, we can limit our claims. Documenting the research process provides the tools to accomplish self-reflection and to tell others precisely what we did and why we did it. Finally, framing a study in ways that consider a wide variety of readers can raise new counter-arguments for researchers to consider.

Problematize Your Core Concepts

It is both the task and responsibility of qualitative research to problematize concepts that are taken for granted. Christians and Carey (1989, p. 358) describe it as "a general task of qualitative studies—to make us aware of the categories in which we think and to analyze and critique such models." "A major part of our task," they write, "is to clarify systematically what we and others already know, or potentially know, of the social world" (p. 355). This systematic clarification begins with making "problematic the common-sense reasoning used" in how we define our variables and establish our research problems (Silverman, 1993, p. 29; see also Hammersley, 1998).

This presents a quandary since, as Silverman (1989) notes, in qualitative research "the phenomenon always escapes." In the context of internet research, one job of qualitative researchers is to problematize the meaning of "the internet" while recognizing that the more closely we look for "the internet," the less likely we are to find such a thing. Rather than predefining "the internet" (see Hine in Chapter 1), we must disaggregate it. At one level, this task means understanding the architecture of the elements of the internet we study and how it compares and contrasts to the architectures of internet media others have studied. At another level, it means we must look for and consider the interconnections among the internet and the life-worlds within which its use is situated and which it is used to construct. Much as we problematize and unpack our concepts, however, ultimately, we must break them down until we are working with a set of clearly, concretely defined concepts that we can apply consistently.

Listen to Participants

In problematizing concepts and otherwise coming to an understanding of the social context being studied, most qualitative researchers need to pay attention to how the members of those contexts see things. Qualitative research, especially ethnography, is generally concerned with understanding a social group as its members understand themselves,

to articulate the concepts they know tacitly but silently. However, it is common to see studies of online materials, including interactions among people posted in public spaces, that ignore the perspectives of those who authored and consumed those texts. This is not a problem if one makes no claims regarding participant perspectives (e.g., those who study language patterns online without reference to intent, such as Herring, 1993), although even these scholars might gain insight into the most profitable ways to bound their studies if they begin from the participants' orientations. Yet, listening to participants does not mean taking their account at face value (Silverman, 1989). To the contrary, as Briggs (1986) wrote about in *Learning How to Ask*, what we hear from those we interview—and observe as well—has to be seen as situated performances rather than direct truth-dumps. Watching and listening to how they define concepts and how they frame situations can, however, provide materials for stronger interpretations of social worlds and, when well documented (see below), can create evidence to support those interpretations.

Attend to Context

Research objects come to mean in context (Christians & Carey, 1989), and one way to produce high-quality work is to make decisions that are informed by thoughtful consideration of the research contexts (see Orgad in Chapter 2). We cannot know in advance which contexts will emerge as most meaningful. Every research field has multiple possible sites that could be studied, and throughout a study we may have to make judgments about which ones are most "valuable for studying the scenes that structure the social reality of a particular group" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 80). We must be sensitive to the boundaries that are constructed by participants to frame their activities, though we may have good reason to subsume participant perspectives within a larger framework. In the context of internet research, those boundaries may be tracked by following the online traces that are left in field sites (see Hine and boyd in Chapter 1). Perhaps most important, though, is the need to immerse one's self in a field over time while seeking to understand its many contexts. The scholars in this collection all took months, if not years, to amass data from a range of areas of online spaces or in a range of situations both online and off. The understanding of context that comes as a result enables them to explain for their readers why one analytic route made more sense than another or why a few examples should be taken to represent a larger phenomenon.

Attend to Yourself

It is almost a cliché at this point to argue that qualitative research should be reflexive. This book can be seen as a collection of exemplars of reflexivity. Reflexivity is sometimes cast as a question of identifying one's assumptions and biases up front so that readers can make independent assessments of their impact on the research process and resulting interpretations. That is, indeed, important. But these chapters demonstrate that it is not enough to engage in reflexivity only to identify biases (or, at the opposite extreme, to write autobiography). Our work is strengthened when we second-guess ourselves and think deeply about how our background and personal reactions shape our research focus, approach, and interpretation (see Hine and Kendall in Chapter 1 and Markham in Chapter 5). To do this well, researchers must not only engage in continuous honest reflection on their own experience but they must also show how those reflections lead to insights. For instance, Kendall in Chapter 4 shows how she could have used reflection on her own emotional and sexual attitudes toward the people and conversations she studied as a source of considerable insight into social formation, power, and hierarchy, had she been prepared to risk their discussion.

Seek Contrasts in the Data

When researchers examine cases that seem to contradict the patterns they are claiming, yet show how those seeming exceptions demonstrate an underlying principle able to account both for the pattern and deviations, it is hard to argue against their interpretation. Silverman argues for the principle of refutability, telling qualitative researchers to continuously argue against their initial assumptions (1993, 2005). "Interpretations need to be made explicit and full advantage should be taken of any opportunities to test their limits and to assess alternatives" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 19). Deviant cases are particularly important both in refuting and refining interpretations and in convincing readers that your interpretation is able to account for examples that do not seem to fit the pattern (Silverman, 2005). Shani Orgad's discussion in Chapter 2 of women who did not use the internet in handling their breast cancer offers a particularly nice example in this collection. Through talking with these women, she was able to gain insight into the limits of the online spaces on which she focused and take a more critical stance toward their claims to inclusiveness.

Limit Your Claims

An otherwise fine piece of qualitative research can be undone by overstated claims, and an important component of thinking through the arguments one might make against an interpretation is determining to what extent claims are supported by the evidence brought to bear. We need to remain focused on what we actually assessed and on what we can demonstrate to others with systematically collected examples (and counter-examples). Even as qualitative researchers recognize the local particularity of their study, most strive to produce work with significance beyond those local parameters. Rather than striving for "generalizability"—a concept that assumes a stable replicable world in which one set of meanings prevail—qualitative researchers need to focus on providing thick descriptions against which other contexts can be compared and on articulating processes and dynamics that can be used as bases for exploring other domains. As Montgomery and Baxter (1998, p. 170) write, "The purpose [of dialogic inquiry] is to elaborate the potential for coordination."

Document Your Research Process

The last two guidelines I offer regarding counter-arguments pertain to writing. It's essential to document your research project. Throughout this collection, scholars have argued that we need to make our implicit considerations explicit (Sveningsson in Chapter 3), articulate our choices (Markham in Chapter 5), and turn "tentative forays . . . into defensible decisions, and retrofit research questions to emergent field sites" (Hine, Chapter 1, p. 6). Writing down what we do at the time, rereading those writings, and considering our own reactions to them are essential parts of reflexive practice and also provide the means to concretely demonstrate to readers how and why we made the choices that we did.

Such records can also enhance our claims to reliability (Silverman, 2005). We should not be in the business of promising that other people will see exactly the same things we did should they return to our field sites; indeed, they should expect change. But we should be in the business of convincing readers that had they been there when we were, looking at the things we looked at using the analytic perspectives we used, then they would have seen things that were extremely close to what we saw. Keeping copious notes makes it far easier to articulate our process to others so that they have grounds on which to make this and other judgments.

Frame the Study for Diverse Readers

Researchers who have attended to these points have probably anticipated most of the likely counter-arguments and are well positioned to write up what they have to offer. But as Markham discusses in Chapter 5, qualitative researchers need to consider how their work will be read by distant and different audiences, a rhetorical (and ethical) challenge for which we are rarely if ever trained. Every audience needs the researcher to spell out clear connections between evidence and claims it is used to support (Hammersley, 1998). "No matter the perspective, assumptions should be stated and methods should be explained in relation to the perspective's ideals of inquiry, and the reporting should be accessible to other scholars" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 173). Researchers owe it to readers to make clear what "analytical or practical significance [they are] being asked to attach to [a] 'finding'" (Silverman, 2005, p. 70).

❖ DEVELOP COMPELLING EXPLANATIONS

Much of the discussion thus far has presented quality primarily as a matter of recognizing limitations and being preemptively defensive. However, we mustn't lose sight of the proactive power of qualitative research. What makes qualitative research valuable is its ability to offer ways of thinking that change how we understand and perhaps act in our social world. In concluding my recommendations, then, I want to consider what we should strive for in the findings we offer.

Several thinkers have argued that, at its best, qualitative analysis has an "analytic depth" (Silverman, 2005, p. 236) that achieves "poetic resonance" (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 362) with both the people studied and those in other contexts. The "prophetic sensitizing concept" (Goffman's use of "stigma" is an excellent example), write Christians and Carey (1989, p. 373), is "the most lasting contribution qualitative research can make":

> By sensitizing concepts we mean taxonomical systems that discover an integrating scheme within the data themselves . . . the qualitative researcher maps out territories by finding seminal ideas that become permanent intellectual contributions while unveiling the inner character of events or situations. (Christians & Carey, 1989, p. 370)

In this quote, Christians and Carey note that compelling explanations offer a taxonomical system, but they also point out that these

schemes are not merely lists but are "integrating schemes" that reveal "inner character."

Too often for my tastes, qualitative researchers develop lists of categories or emergent themes or generate typologies, but do not go far enough to understand the underlying dynamics that account for those categories. "Emergent grounded theory" is used to "generate themes" that are then analyzed piecemeal rather than integrated into an insightful explanation of the dynamics responsible for these patterns.

I have found Bourdieu's writings on the logic of practice (1990) particularly helpful in thinking about how categorizations are not research ends in themselves but evidence of an underlying social logic that organizes not only the list but other social phenomena (including those not observed) as well. Identifying logics lets one offer explanations that are, to quote Christians and Carey (1989, p. 367) both "well rounded and parsimonious." The practices I have outlined above for thinking about data and the research process should all help guide researchers toward logics. The key is to examine data not as cumulative but as mutual contexts for one another (see Orgad in Chapter 2). Looking to logic rather than types also keeps the focus on process. Our focus should be on the "processes through which the relations between elements are articulated" (Silverman, 1989, p. 226).

Importantly, the dialectic approach positions the understanding of difference and the interplays of difference as more important than strivings for unity. Our goal is not to find a single explanatory element (Silverman, 1989), but to reveal the complexity of our subject, in part by identifying the dialectic pulls in the field. Baxter (2007, p. 138) writes, "The vexing problem is an orientation toward unity and the intellectual problem is how to embrace difference." One measure of quality from this perspective is thus the extent to which our approaches and findings speak to the interplay among different voices rather than taking a unified path to a unitary outcome.

In my work (Baym, 2000), I identified (listed) strategies that participants in a soap-opera discussion group used to maintain the group's self-identity as "a bunch of friends." However, I was also able to use their own discursive practices to demonstrate that there was an underlying rationale for maintaining that identity—it allowed people to voice both contradictory opinions about the television show they were watching and personal self-disclosures that could enhance others' interpretations of the show. Friendliness was thus a way to mediate between the competing needs to have diverse perspectives and to have an environment safe enough that people would be willing to engage in highly personal self-disclosure.

These rich and insightful understandings that qualitative research can offer should go beyond explaining the field bounded by one's study to offer insights that can be applied outside of their contexts of origin and contribute to an enhanced understanding. There are many ways to offer insights of relevance and use beyond the specific area of inquiry. A work may generate new sensitizing constructs. It may generate new theory, or it may refine older theories. Value may be provided through novel claims or through affirmation of the applicability of old ones in other contexts.

We cannot predict the ways in which others may find our work useful. However, if we are clear in the decisions we make throughout our research practices, document our procedures and reflections well, and provide our readers with concrete thick descriptions and convincing evidence for the processes and logics we describe, then we will have given them the materials to find their own value in our work.

In closing, I return to my claim in the introduction and beginning of this chapter that we benefit from thinking of qualitative internet research as a process of managing dialectical tensions. This conclusion has argued that dialectics can be seen throughout the research process, as we make choices about how to collect, interpret, and present our data. However, dialectic thinking is also important in understanding our very understandings of quality. From a dialectical perspective, our goal is not to convert others to our own way of seeing. We are not after one true explanation. Rather, we are after a thorough, grounded, trustworthy voice that makes meaningful contributions to ongoing dialogues and on which others can build.

Finally, I note again that nothing I have written here is limited to the internet. That is as it should be. The internet is an exciting and ever-changing research focus. It is a research tool that offers unbridled access to new kinds of data and may offer exciting new ways to present research. Certainly, the internet magnifies and forces us to confront what seem like new challenges in our research. Yet when we confront those challenges, as the voices in this book have done, we find that these are challenges all researchers face, not just internet researchers. Bringing internet research into the dialogue serves to highlight questions of concern to all, but reaffirms that to do good qualitative internet research is to do good qualitative research.

Response to Nancy Baym

Annette N. Markham

❖   ❖   ❖

A trap in qualitative internet inquiry (or qualitative inquiry of any sort, not just internet related) is to believe that qualitative methods bestow a natural interpretive clarity and self-reflexive awareness on the researcher. As Nancy Baym aptly points out, the myriad approaches falling into this broad category, most of which are flexible and adaptive, can lead researchers to believe that "anything goes." This oversimplification is exacerbated when researchers new to this form of inquiry read publications in which the author buries the literature review, application of procedures, analytical processes, and theoretical development within the story and between the lines. The interpretation can seem to flow effortlessly from the writer, and the unique case can seem unlinked from any other phenomenon or case.

Add to this the fact that even among methodologists "qualitative inquiry" means very different things. Are we talking about the methods of collecting information? The application of procedures? The rigor of interpretation? The worldview of the researcher? Qualitative inquiry continues to discover and embrace its diversity, encompassing a multiplicity of worldviews, procedures, and approaches. Within this broad research context, it is difficult to know where a particular author is coming from in the research unless he or she spells out in great detail the procedures he or she followed, the inclusion of which can clash with current modes of writing and the ability to present research in flowing narrative forms. Nancy Baym's discussion of a dialectical approach to finding quality in qualitative internet research offers a useful

treatment of some of these tensions. The criteria she offers are welcome starting points for identifying what might be the framework for quality in social internet research, particularly for researchers new to this form of inquiry.

I've been studying the theories and practices of qualitative research methods for more than 15 years now, first within the social sciences and, shortly thereafter, diving into interpretive, feminist, and postmodern schools of thought. A certain part of me enjoys the idea of putting together a puzzle or solving a mystery so that I can see the whole. Another, stronger part of me enjoys the disjuncture, the seams and gaps and points of connections between elements or ideas. A disruptive deconstruction allows me to see new patterns of meaning not otherwise identifiable at the placid surface of everyday taken-for-granted experience.

Nancy and I come from similar educational backgrounds, but the way we experience qualitative inquiry and think about method differs in both subtle and sharp ways. As I composed this final response of our book, I tried multiple variations on a theme: finessing Nancy's arguments, arguing about the details of dialogical and dialectical theories, making a few erudite (I hoped!) comments about quality in methods, taking the discussion to the level of epistemology and ontology, and even writing an illustrative narrative. As I listened to the voices in my head, I heard not just a dialogue but a cacophony. I found myself writing in circles.

I finally realized that, although I wanted to embrace the notion of dialectics, this image did not satisfactorily capture the complexity of qualitative inquiry as I have experienced it. I find the concept useful, yet its historical roots don't sit well with me. Early conceptions of the dialectical process hold that it will eventually yield a middle ground that is Truth. In later conceptions, the dialectical process yields a third alternative, drawing on and also stronger than both elements. The fragmented postmodernist in me resists the dualism. A dualism is certainly not what Nancy intended, but I can't stop thinking about the limits of a two- or three-sided image. Also, as I reflect on my own research, almost every moment during the course of a study illustrates yet another dialectical tension that cannot be managed or balanced. Rather than bore you and me with an elaborate explanation of the long stretches of paralysis that result during any given project because of these irresolvable tensions, I realized I needed to figure out what image of quality and qualitative inquiry made better sense in my world.

❖ CRYSTALS VERSUS TRIANGLES

On further reflection, it occurred to me that the very interplay and juxtaposition of dialectical tensions in my own research seem to yield the most interesting possibilities, particularly within the criteria for quality Nancy discusses in the second part of her essay. So while I might begin a sentence agreeing with Nancy that the phenomenological problem is irresolvable and, therefore, we should get on to the more practical issue of determining what might make a study more or less compelling, in the same breath, I find I disagree—because struggling with this problem is part of what yields reflexive research, a key to generating research that is perceived as trustworthy and compelling.

The image of a prism mentioned by Lori Kendall in Chapter 1 resonates strongly. Laurel Richardson (1994, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) proposes that the central image for qualitative inquiry should be the crystal. Her metaphor is worth quoting at length here:

> The central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry with an infinite variety of shapers, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach. Crystals grow, change, and are altered, but they are not amorphous. Crystals are prisms that reflect externalities *and* refract within themselves, creating different colors, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose—not triangulation, crystallization.
>
> In a crystal, light can be both waves and particles. Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of validity (we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves); and crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. (Richardson, 1997, p. 92)

This image is compelling because it values both interior and exterior aspects of the research process, giving credence to the fact that all research is situated and personal—a thoroughly human endeavor. Yet order and rigor are necessary to preserve the integrity of the outcome.

❖ CRITERIA VERSUS STANDARDS

To shift to a slightly different point, no matter what metaphors or principles we apply to our own research, in the academic world of knowledge production, "quality" is a state granted and recognized from the outside. One's work is assessed in context by various audiences, who have their own sets of standards and context-specific criteria for evaluation. Frankly, my own beliefs about what makes quality in social research vary widely, depending on the context within which I am making a judgment. Let's problematize this more closely.

Who is doing the research? If am teaching new researchers, I am patient but highly skeptical of their work, insisting on in-depth explanations and justifications of approach. On the other hand, if I know a researcher has previously conducted what is commonly perceived to be high-quality research, a certain level of credibility is built into my reading of all that person's work. I more readily accept experimental or narrative work from someone who has proven herself previously.

Where was the research published? If someone writes about a cultural practice in a piece labeled "fiction" and I find meaning in this work, I feel grateful that I gained added benefit from what might otherwise be "merely" a story [scare quotes to denote I understand the irony]. Sure, I might question the methods, but since he published something as fiction, I don't quibble with the details. On the other hand, if someone writes a good story and labels it "research," I am much more likely to question those methods and expect some explanation of how and on what empirical evidence that researcher derived her conclusions.

What is the goal of the research? This book takes a fairly narrow stance on the goal of research and therefore offers definitions and perspectives that align with this goal. Producing research findings for publication in academically acceptable venues for the purpose of contributing to a body of knowledge is not a universal or all-encompassing end. Research intended to build community, promote social justice, disrupt dominant patterns of power, or dismantle tidy categories of meaning requires quite different criteria for evaluation.

The three previous paragraphs may seem to paint a picture of qualitative inquiry as a perilous house of cards, where the criteria always change and determinations of quality are essentially fickle. However, I want to focus attention on the idea that criteria and standards are intertwined concepts, but they are not synonymous: A criterion specifies an attribute or behavior, which then serves as a measure for judgment. A standard can be thought of as a set of criteria or a principle on which assessments rely.

While one's criteria may change for various reasons, one's standards need not. The former necessarily morph with each specific piece of research, because each research project is a unique, situated, authored cultural product, whereas the latter can and most often do remain firmly embedded in one's ontological and axiological frameworks for

understanding what it means to do "good" research within the vast umbrella we call "qualitative inquiry."

I draw attention to this distinction because it helps clarify the idea that qualitative inquiry can be wide open for the creative invention and mixing of methodological approaches, and yet, at the same time, particular criteria must inform one's work: As Nancy emphasizes, a systematic focus and consistency will build symmetry within the crystal that—even if not apparent to the reader—will have high resonance, thus marking the project as one that is credible and trustworthy.

This is why the crystalline image works well as a way of thinking about quality: Order and rigor exist in a form that exhibits multiple refracting surfaces, appears differently depending on how you look at it or what type of light is targeted at it, and reveals both processes and products (in a crystal we can see both waves and particles). The criteria Nancy describes provide a beginning point for thinking about how one might introduce order and rigor as and within crystalline forms, but are not an ending, because within this metaphor, multiplicities can emerge.

❖ IMPROVISATION AND A FULL TOOLBOX

Given the most likely audience reading this book, I think most would agree with the notion that "the more you know, the better off you are." If you want to create research reports that are respected by academics (and I'm not suggesting this as the sole or most admirable goal of research by any means; I'm just acknowledging that it is probably the most common objective held by readers of this book), you should be well trained in a range of approaches—not only so that you make good choices from the beginning but so that you also know how to explain your decisions later. Mastery of multiple methods allows one to move with ease in multiple directions. Improvisation is easier if one has a broad range of skills to begin with, because it requires the ability to be fully present and aware and to draw on any number of options in the moment as we interact with the context of study.

Of course, as we grow more aware of the multiple perspectives that inform qualitative inquiry, the choices can become daunting. Every year, I realize how much more I don't know. As I study epistemological and axiological discussions within different cultures, my methodological choices only become more bewildering. On the one hand, we want more tools and techniques to draw on, so that we don't fall prey to the axiom, "When the only tool one has is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." On the other hand, when our toolbox includes an

ever-growing mix of interpretive, critical, queer, feminist, postmodernist, postcolonialist tools, nothing looks like the comfortable familiarity of a nail. The project of hammering a nail shifts to something else entirely, which can open up possibilities for political and resistive acts that cannot be ignored in the search for clarity, balance, or parsimony.

Here, I'm not so much talking about method as "application of procedure," whereby we might ask the question of whether it is better (loaded term intended) or not to use interviews or surveys to collect information. I am focused more on the issue of "interpretive rigor," a more recent discussion addressing the methods associated with framing questions, analyzing texts, and interpreting/representing Other in the process of writing and editing findings.

If we take a postmodern stance on knowledge production, we might reject such concepts as theory-building, agreeing with Tyler (1986) that the purpose of ethnography is evocation through aesthetics. If we take to heart a feminist critique of the processes of knowledge production, the search for method might become one that "interrogate[s] what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses" (Butler, 1995, p. 39, emphasis in original). With these perspectives on inquiry, the list of criteria offered by Nancy may not suffice. We might need to raise additional questions: How well do reflexivity, irony, bricolage, intertextuality, pastiche, and hyperreality fit into the master narratives that still discipline our procedural decisions during the research project? And if not at the level of dictating the precise method that ought to be used, how can we find a broader range of options within which we are authorized to call our inquiry legitimate or publishable?

Continuing, if we embrace these contemporary lenses, the goal of meeting some authority's criteria becomes increasingly difficult. Nancy's list is extremely practical—a useful and fruitful starting point. But if that list doesn't resonate with you or you seek to interrogate and dismantle those ideas, what models or concepts associated with methodological rigor would be more useful? What standards apply to your own work, if not these?

❖ ACCOUNT-ABILITY

There are innumerable possible sets of criteria, each with its particular set of delimiters. I find the ethic of accountability a compelling way to address quality because it identifies a standard and specifies underlying criteria that can guide ethical rigor. What does accountability *mean*?

As Maria Christina Gonzalez articulates beautifully in a brief essay on the ethics of a postcolonial ethnography (2003), the term "accountability" has lost its strength as an ethical guide because in the academy, it is "so familiar as to almost be cliché in our intellectual parlance" (p. 78). If we look more closely at what accountability means, we can rediscover its strength as a guide:

> From a colonialist perspective, when we think of the concept of accountability, we are concerned with the possible repercussions for not having followed "the rules" as set forth by the imperial force. Let go of this meaning. Instead, look at the word. Account-ability. The ability to account. To tell a story. (Gonzalez, 2003, p. 82)

Importantly, the ethic of accountability,[1] continues Gonzalez, "is not just the telling of the ethnographic tale. It is the telling of our story, of how we came to know the ethnographic tale. There is no natural boundary between a story and our learning of it" (p. 82). This goes beyond simple explanation, because it is an accounting of choices among various alternatives, as well as a story of missteps, shortcuts, shifts, revelations, and battles. It is only possible if we are able to articulate the beliefs underlying each choice. Since choice necessarily involves competing options, the accountability part comes into play when we are able to explain why we chose this method instead of another equally acceptable method. We can only engage in this level of reflexive analysis of our methodology when we know a lot about methods and where they come from, epistemologically and ontologically speaking. Whether or not accountability is fully expressed in every research report, it is a quality that can be called on at any point, when we should then be able to tell the story of the story. As Gonzalez notes, "It's not so easy" (p. 84).

Nancy and I steadfastly agree that questions of quality must be addressed, but that at some level, one should note a distinctive difference between the methodological level of reflexivity and the rhetorical challenge of making arguments. It is important to be able to explain oneself or preempt some of the audience's questions, but this type of improvisation requires a solid knowledge of the possible choices, a keen awareness of the criteria applied to one's own work, and a reflexive analysis of what criteria might be used by others to assess the quality of our work. Paradoxically, perhaps, I believe this process is less about finding the answers than asking good questions.

❖   RECOMMENDED READING

All three editions of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 2000, 2005) are a valuable resource for understanding the complexities of qualitative inquiry.

For an exhaustive and interesting discussion of paradigmatic controversies and debates over legitimacy, I recommend Guba and Lincoln's chapter, "Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences," in the third edition of that handbook (2005).

For a dense elaboration of the history of qualitative inquiry as well as an outline of the major issues being currently debated in this arena, it is worth reading carefully the introduction to the third edition by Denzin and Lincoln, "Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research" (2005). For a contrasting perspective that more aligns with Nancy's perspective, I recommend Silverman's edited volume *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method, and Practice* (2004).

❖   NOTE

1. The other three ethics discussed by Gonzalez include (2) context, an open-eyed mindfulness; (3) truthfulness, which, more than a "simple consciously expressed truth . . . [is] an opening of the heart, a willingness to be absolutely existentially naked . . . ; and (4) community, a radical transformation of the separated, disengaged 'audience,' 'the field,' 'our readers,' and 'our colleagues'" (2003, p. 84). As I've oversimplified her argument in this footnote, I recommend reading her essay in its entirely.
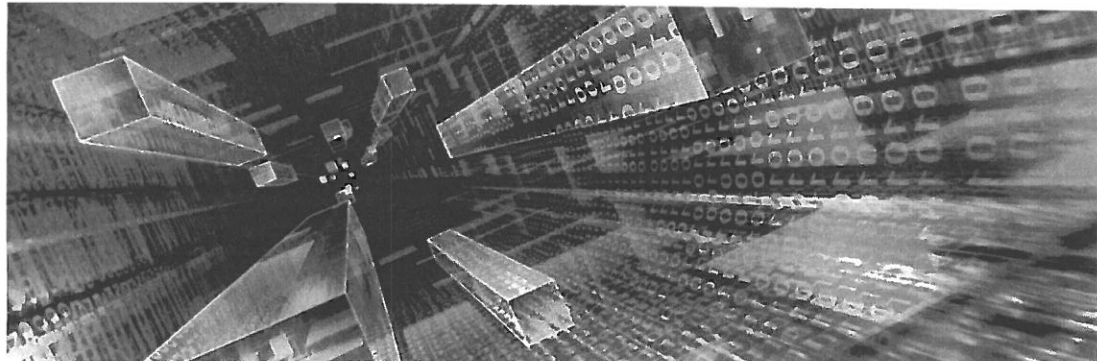
internet inquiry

conversations about method

Edited by

Annette N. Markham
Nancy K. Baym