**THE FEATURES OF EXCELLENT QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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| **Introduction** |

When candidates conduct qualitative research, they are often unsure how to improve their work. What practices difference excellent qualitative research from ordinary qualitative research? What criteria do reviewers or examiners apply to evaluate qualitative research? This document is designed to assist both candidates and supervisors.

**Advice to candidates**

Candidates should read the first section, called an inventory of practices. In particular, candidates, and indeed all qualitative researchers, should be cognisant of all the techniques that are intended to improve the quality or trustworthineses of qualitative research.

**Advice to supervisors**

As a supervisor, you need to guide the decisions of your candidates. You need to help your candidates introduce routines, techniques, and practices that enhance their work. You need to improve the extent to which their work is rich and meaningful as well as trustworthy and credible. This document helps you achieve this goal.

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| **An inventory of practices** |

The following tables present an inventory of criteria or practices that candidates, or indeed all researchers, might consider to enhance their work. Which practices candidates apply will depend on their topic, circumstances, and preferences as well as the theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods they chose. Nevertheless, most candidates should apply, or at least consider, most of these practices. The aim of these techniques is to fulfill five criteria (Lincoln, 1995; for other discussions on the critiera to assess quality, see Baxter & Eyles, 1997):

* Credibility: Do the community members or population feel the findings accurately represent their experience—comparable to internal validity in quantitative studies?
* Transferability: Would the findings apply to other relevant communities or settings—comparable to external validity in quantitative studies?
* Dependability: If someone else conducted the research, would they generate comparable findings—comparable to reliability in quantitative studies?
* Confirmability: Do the findings reflect the responses of participants instead of the biases, motivations, and values of the researchers?
* Authenticity: Do the findings characterize the diversity of perspectives—and willl the findings effect change?

**Data collection**

The first set of techniques and practices tend to revolve around the collection and transcription of data including the interview procedures.

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| Practice or criterion | Description | Caveats, references,  and other details |
| Data saturation | Rather than decide the amount of data to collect in advance, continue to collect data until additional data does not generate novel codes or themes. To increase the likelihood of data saturation   * Interview people who are not the obvious respondents * attempt to overcome barriers that prevent you from interviewing insightful participants * complement interviews with focus groups * utilize distinct methods to collect data about the same topic | See Fusch & Ness (2015) |
| Rich data | Rather than seek only thick data—defined as an extensive range of data—researchers should also seek rich data. Rich data are   * nuanced—that is, themes refer to subtle differences between similar concepts * paradoxical—that is, themes comprise conflicting features * intricate—that is, themes comprise many distinct but overlapping features * multi-layered—that is, the researcher explores the same data or events from distinct perspectives   When data are rich, end users who want to apply the findings of a qualitative study can more readily evaluate whether these findings are indeed applicable to their circumstances, called transferability. Thus, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue, the degree to which qualitative research is transferable is more dependent on the end user and not the research per se. The researchers cannot evaluate transferability, because they do not know how the research will be applied. These researchers can merely supply rich data to enable the end users to evaluate transferability. | For a review, see Fusch & Ness (2015) |
| Triangulation | Complement one set of methods—such as interviews and focus groups—with other methods—such as document analysis—partly to overcome the limitations of each approach. In addition, collect data from a broader range of informants, documents, or both. | * See Shenton (2004), Section 2c * Cite Brewer & Hunter (1989); Fusch & Ness (2015) |
| Promoting honesty in informants | To encourage informants to be as honest as possible, researchers should   * attempt to develop a strong rapport before asking invasive questions. That is, before each interview, or early in the interview, share personal background and goals * emphasize that answers are not correct or incorrect—and even vague or unformed responses could be very helpful * highlight their independence from the leaders of these informants if applicable | * See Shenton (2004), Section 2e   **References about creating rapport**   * Block, L. & Leseho, J. (2005). Listen and I tell you something: Storytelling and social action in the healing of the oppressed', British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 33, 175-184. * Elmir, R., Schmied, V., Jackson, D., & Wilkes, L. (2011). Interviewing people about potentially sensitive topics. Nurse Researcher, 19, 12-16.s |
| Iterative probes about details over time | Researchers could probe some topic several times during an interview, striving to elicit more details. As they garner more information, the researchers might detect clarifications and even contradictions inaccuracies—and may even discard suspect data | * See Shenton (2004), Section 2f |
| Transcription checks | To assess whether the transcription was accurate, the researcher has assessed whether random samples of the audio data match the transcription. | See Braun & Clarke (2006), Table 2, Item 1 |

**Data analysis and interpretation**

The second set of techniques and practices tend to revolve around the coding and interpretation of data.

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| Practice or criterion | Description | Caveats, references,  and other details |
| Uniform attention | While coding, each chunk of data—such as every answer or sentence that participants articulate—receive equal attention, at least initially. That is, the researcher does not devote more time and effort to responses that match their initial preconceptions or assumptions. | See Braun & Clarke (2006), Table 2, Item 2 |
| Broadness of themes or categories | The themes or categories should entail a large proportion of the data or codes; the themes or categories are not merely derived from a few striking examples or codes. Indeed, researchers should conduct negative case analysis—in which they seek data or code that do not match the existing themes or categories. They could then refine the themes or categories accordingly. | * See Braun & Clarke (2006), Table 2, Item 3 * Cite Miles & Huberman, (1994) |
| Multiple researchers | More than one researcher can participate in coding and translating codes to themes, categories, or conclusions. |  |

**Project management**

The third set of techniques and practices tend to revolve around the management of these projects, including preparation, recruitment, and evaluation of the procedures.

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| Practice or criterion | Description | Caveats, references,  and other details |
| Audit trail | Construct an account that summarizes all the decisions the researchers reached and the activities they conducted during the study. This audit trail should include   * all raw data that were collected * memos that summarize decisions while converting the data into codes, themes, or categories * memos that summarize how the researchers refined and integrated themes or categories * research journals that outline the processes the researchers followed, such as who they contacted * research journals that outline personal thoughts, reflections, or insights about the project   Monitoring changes in the perspectives of researchers over time is called progressive subjectivity | Cite Akkerman et al (2006); Hoepfl (1997); Koch (2006). Audit trails were inspired by the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) |
| Reflexivity or positionality statements | Many researchers write a reflexivity statement in which they describe how their life history and experiences shaped their interests and perspective of this phenomenon. This reflexivity statement does not usually outline their beliefs about the phenomenon, but instead includes events in their life, such as cultural dynamics, personal challenges, helpful endeavors, and professional associates that ignited their pursuit of this topic. These reflexivity statements enable readers to assess whether or not the conclusions of this research are biased by the past experiences of the researcher (Merriman, 2009) but can also facilitate epoche as well—the capacity of researchers to diminish the effect of their preconceptions and experiences on analysis and interpretation. | * Cite Merriman (2009) |
| Bracketing and epoche | Before conducting interviews and analyzing data, researchers could undertake a process called epoche—a Greek word to indicate restraint from judgment. Epoche represents the attempt of researchers to contemplate, and then to set aside or bracket, their preconceptions or previous knowledge about the phenomenon (see also Rolls & Relf, 2006; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Typically, the researchers   * first transcribe all their knowledge about the phenomenon, including their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and values as well as their power or role in this research—entries that gradually accumulate over time. These entries are sometimes collectively labelled a reflexive journal. * Once they reach a point of saturation, in which no additional knowledge can be transcribed, they subject these entries to systematic analysis. They may, for example, distinguish units of meaning, allocate these units of meaning into codes and then themes, and finally construct a cohesive description of their understanding. * Finally, while designing their research, collecting data, and analyzing data, researchers deliberately attempt to set this understanding aside. That is, they attempt to foster an open mind to the perspectives of participants. | * Giorgi (2009); Moustakas (1994); more applicable to phenomenology * Some researchers, such as constructivist grounded theorists, believe that such bracketing is not possible to achieve effectively |
| Familiarity with the culture | The researchers need to become very familiar with the cultures and perspectives of the organizations or communities that are participating in their study. Researchers recommend prolonged engagement with these organizations or communities to develop understanding and trust. | Researchers need to ensure that prolonged engagement does not detract time and resources from the organizations or communities—or impair their professional judgment.   * See Shenton (2004), Section 2b * Cite Lincoln and Guba (1985); Silverman (2000) |
| Complement purposive sampling with random sampling | In qualitative research, researchers often apply purposive sampling—in which they seek individuals or sources of information they believe will be most informative. However, they could also complement this technique with some random sampling. For example, they could randomly chose 5 individuals from a specific comminity. Without this procedure, the biases of researchers might affect who they choose to interview and thus bias the results. | A random sample might identify individuals who are uncooperative or uninformative   * See Shenton (2004), Section 2c   Cite Bouma & Atkinson, (1995) |
| Debriefing | Researchers should convey their provisional themes, concepts, ideas, and conclusions to project supervisors or directors on a regular basis—as well as to other peers. During these conversations, these supervisors or directors might   * question these conclusions to uncover complications and generate richer data * convey some topics or perspectives the researcher might have overlooked * unearth some biases in the researcher | * See Shenton (2004), Section 2h and 2i |
| Assessment by informants: Member checks | Informants should be granted an opportunity to assess the work the researcher produces. For example   * During interviews, on several occasions, researchers should summarize their understanding of the answers—and ask the informant whether this depiction is correct * Informants can read the transcripts of their interviews—because audios can be scratchy * Informants can be asked whether their answers are consistent with the emerging themes or concepts * Informants can be asked to offer explanations for some of the key findings that emerged | * See Shenton (2004), Section 2l * Cite Brewer & Hunter (1989); Miles & Huberman, (1994) |

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| **Overview of supervision** |

When supervising a research candidate who wants to collect and analyze qualitative data, such as interviews, focus groups, and documents, you might encourage these individuals to complete the following activities, roughly in this order

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| Activity candidate should complete | How to support this candidate |
| The candidates should immerse themselves in the communities or settings they want to study | Ensure the candidates have   * read the scholarly literature as well as informal literature, such as websites, brochures, and documents * attended events and participated in activities, if appropriate * spoken to members informally |
| The candidates should contemplate the research questions they might want to explore | Encourage candidates to develop questions that   * accord with the suggestions and needs of community members * explore some fundamental paradox—a contradiction or obstacle that cannot be reconciled easily * utilizes either their distinct talents passions—or the strengths and achievements of their university |
| The candidates should decide on which theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods might be suitable. | Encourage candidates to   * proceed to “Choosing your research methodology and methods” on the website of useful materials for HDR candidates; read the document on choosing suitable qualitative approaches * guide candidates as they utilize this material—or other guidelines—to help them clarify which approaches they will apply   Supervisors should be familiar, or at least become familiar, with these theoretical perspectives, methodologies, and methods. They might, for example, need to read a few chapters to familiarize themselves with the approaches the candidate adopts. |
| Besides implementing these methodologies and methods, the candidates should also introduce a range of techniques to improve the quality of their research—techniques that are applicable to most qualitative paradigms | Supervisors should have read the first section of this document to familiarize themselves with these techniques and practices. |

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