

Preface

Qualitative research embraces the complexities of human thought and behavior. The qualitative researcher acknowledges, accepts, and welcomes the challenges created by the fact that what people say, what they do, and how they think are not the products of any one thing, but rather the results of a mosaic of influences that contributes to individuals' life events. It is this complexity in qualitative research that invites a range of perspectives in the research community—with some researchers who may be unsure how to conceptualize and operationalize the complexity of human realities and are thereby tempted to skirt the issue by applying only a highly structured (near-quantitative) approach to qualitative research; and many other researchers who are comfortable in thinking deeply about the complexity of qualitative research and may be embroiled in ongoing and strongly worded rhetoric concerning the appropriateness of various theoretical underpinnings, philosophical paradigms, and related research design issues.

Yet we believe that all qualitative researchers share two important areas of interest: (1) a mutual respect for the intricacies associated with the life of human beings and (2) a desire to incorporate quality features into their research designs to maximize the ultimate usefulness of their research outcomes. These two shared interests present qualitative researchers with a unique challenge. On the one hand, qualitative researchers want to maintain some level of flexibility and innovation in their research designs so they can better discover the subtle connections (influences) that bring meaning to some aspect of a person's life; on the other hand, qualitative researchers strive to develop well-thought-out research designs that produce credible data along with the ability to conduct complete and accurate analyses. It is this challenge—maintaining innovation while fostering quality outcomes—that served as the impetus for this book.

If qualitative research is to provide something of value to the consumers of the research, then it must be done well. The need for flexibility and innovation in qualitative research designs does not justify an “anything goes” or sloppy approach. Like all forms of social research, qualitative methods benefit from an adherence to certain quality standards that are aimed at maximizing the researcher’s and the consumer’s confidence in research results. The idea of applying quality criteria to qualitative research is not a new concept, and indeed others before us have advocated variations of a “quality” approach at some stage in the research design. However, in our view, what has been missing is a comprehensive “quality strategy” in qualitative research that is (a) paradigm neutral, (b) flexible (i.e., does not adhere to a defined research method), and (c) applicable to all phases of the research process.

Our book, which is a product of an intensive and rewarding 3-year collaboration, presents an applied approach to qualitative research design that is grounded in a quality framework that can help researchers judge the efficacy of their qualitative research designs and incorporate design features that maximize the credibility of the data they gather, the accuracy of the analyses they conduct, and the usefulness of the outcomes from various qualitative research methods. Our Total Quality Framework (TQF) provides a comprehensive perspective for creating, managing, and interpreting quality research studies and evaluating the likelihood that they will provide information that is valid and useful for the purposes for which a study is intended.

There are four interrelated TQF components: *Credibility* (completeness and accuracy associated with data gathering), *Analyzability* (completeness and accuracy related to the processing and verification of data), *Transparency* (completeness of the final documents and the degree to which the consumer of the research is able to fully evaluate the study and its transferability to other contexts), and *Usefulness* (ability to do something of value with the research outcomes). The TQF may not be suitable for planning and evaluating every qualitative research study (e.g., critical theory research, which is not necessarily bound by conventional research protocol but rather is highly collaborative and used at times to incite activism among marginalized groups); however, we believe that it provides a very useful tool for most students as well as research scholars and practitioners to apply in designing, conducting, and interpreting their research so that their qualitative studies are more likely to (a) gather high-quality data, (b) lead to more robust and valid interpretations of the data, and (c) ultimately generate more highly useful outcomes. As we try to convey throughout the book, it is not our view that applying the TQF will yield a dichotomous (i.e., a thumbs-up vs. thumbs-down) judgment that a qualitative study is accurate or not accurate, useful or not useful. Rather, we believe that the TQF can help consumers of a given research study gain a greater sense of confidence that may range from “not at all confident” to “extremely confident” about the study’s validity and usefulness.

Unlike other texts that relegate discussions of validity and quality issues to one or two chapters, quality concerns such as construct validity, interresearcher

reliability, researcher bias, nonresponse, and verification strategies are discussed in great detail throughout this entire book. Furthermore, as an applied approach, our book is full of real-life examples—taken from education, psychology, health care, sociology, communications, marketing, and other disciplines, as well as from our own respective experiences conducting myriad qualitative research studies throughout our careers (which collectively exceed 80 years)—that illustrate effective uses of particular methods and demonstrate TQF best practices (e.g., related to mitigating interviewer bias, gaining cooperation from participants, developing an interview/discussion/observation guide, the suitability of specific moderator techniques, and use of observation grids in ethnography or visual displays in content analysis).

The core of this book revolves around five basic qualitative research methods: in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions, ethnography, qualitative content analysis, and multi-method research (specifically, case study and narrative research). Each chapter begins with a discussion of the method's fundamentals (what the method is and how it is used), followed by a critical look at the strengths and limitations of the method (as well as the most popular modes within that method) *from a TQF perspective*. It is this in-depth understanding of the method that, we believe, helps prepare the reader to consider the application of the TQF to that method by way of the lengthy elaboration we provide for the remainder of each chapter.

Each chapter presents unique concepts not found in many other texts. For example, in Chapter 3 (on IDIs), among many other topics, we provide a lengthy discussion of the strengths and limitations of the email IDI mode; discuss the appropriate number of IDIs to conduct (in any mode), stating that the point of “saturation” is not a good-enough measure by which to determine the appropriate number of IDIs and, instead, we pose 10 questions that the researcher should ask and satisfactorily answer at the fieldwork stage; and highlight the unstructured IDI from a feminist research orientation. In Chapter 4 (on focus groups), we describe and weigh the pros and cons of asynchronous online (or “bulletin board”) group discussions, the role of enabling and projective techniques (especially in the face-to-face mode), and the effect of group dynamics and interaction on the quality of the data gathered. In Chapter 5, we present our definition of ethnography, describe the strengths and limitations of online and “mobile ethnography,” and provide a schematic depicting our five distinct categories of observer roles. In Chapter 6 (on content analysis), we make the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” qualitative content analysis, outline the two broad phases (data generation and data analysis) and the eight steps in the qualitative content analysis process, illustrate an example of a codebook and coding form, and discuss the particular advantages and disadvantages associated with the utilization of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. Chapter 7 discusses multi-method research with specific attention to two case-centered approaches: case study and narrative research. This chapter includes an overview of the major typologies in case study and narrative research, presents a new internal-external

classification scheme for case studies along with an explanation of what we mean by the “unit of analysis” and the “variables of analysis,” and presents a six-step process to conducting case study and narrative research.

This book is intended for graduate-level students who have some basic familiarity with qualitative research, as well as for scholars and practitioners in the academic, government, not-for-profit, and commercial sectors. And, as addressed in Chapter 8, this book not only serves as a guide to developing, conducting, analyzing, and reporting quality research, but can also assist in the writing, review, and evaluation of research proposals as well as other research reports, such as conference papers and manuscripts for journals and books.

Our book is well suited to a straight-through reading—for example, spending approximately 2 weeks of a 13-week college semester on Chapters 1 and 2, 2 weeks on each of the method chapters, and the final week on Chapter 8 (proposal writing and other applications of the TQF)—or to being read selectively. If this book is read selectively, we strongly encourage the reader to first study Chapter 2 before reading any of the other individual chapters (i.e., Chapters 3–8).

To assist the reader as well as the college instructor, many pedagogical aids have been incorporated in this book. For example, each method chapter begins with a chapter preview, includes figures and tables throughout that highlight important content (e.g., the application of a method to vulnerable or hard-to-reach population segments), and ends with (a) a chapter summary, (b) exercise and discussion topics, (c) suggested further reading and Web resources, and (d) a case study that demonstrates the utilization of many of the TQF standards discussed within the chapter. The book also includes an extensive glossary of terms.