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**FEATURE**

**That God May Know My Integrity**

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**Abstract.** *Qualitative research has long struggled for universal acceptability and specific equitable value with quantitative research. Although its acceptance and value have increased over time there remain concerns and outright rejections that demand the researcher's attention and care. This article, through a cursory review of the literature, considers historical developments in the on-going debate between the quantitative and qualitative worlds of research as they pertain to ethics and integrity in research. It offers reflections on the challenges to qualitative research reliability, validity, and generalizability and provides guidance on ways qualitative researchers increase the credibility of their inquiry and scholarship.*

**Keywords:** Integrity, qualitative research, ethics, trustworthiness, validity, reliability

**Introduction**

The lead story in the August 9, 2016 issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Academe Today* section was "The 5 Missteps That Toppled Linda Katehi" (p. 1). The issue carried, along with photographs of an obviously distressed Katehi, two articles reporting on her resignation and related conflicts between the president of the University of California system and Katehi, the outgoing chancellor of the University of California Davis campus. Apparent provocations that led to the chancellor's resignation were matters of operational ethics and integrity. She was investigated for and ostensibly found to have "acted inappropriately" in regard to five of seven allegations, including (1) incomplete disclosure of family relationships in university employment decisions, (2) manipulating media reports of a university incident with the intent to mislead the public by projecting a more positive image, (3) inaccurately reporting uses of funds, (4) breaking trust by wavering on a personal pledge to the university, and

(5) entering into questionable professional affiliations in the face of evidence of indiscretions of the partner institutions—one related to the inflation of research statistics.

This is just one glaring example of what some classify a global crisis in ethics and integrity. The research and news teem with reports of ethical failures and lack of integrity in practices related to all areas of life: climate change, business, civic engagement, economics and finance, education and its governance and accreditation, family, government, healthcare, immigration, media, technology, organized politics, religion, research, and much more. Often these shortcomings are related to political pursuits, both personal and public. This is true, even of research.

After decades of studying research practices, and the environments in which they occur, Lincoln and Guba (2013) declared that, “Every human institution and every human action, including inquiry, is both profoundly ethical and profoundly political in nature” (p. 74). Yet, researchers can, indeed must, avoid being drawn into the politicization of academic inquiry and manipulation of scholarship. Researchers must always resist temptations to act with less than the highest integrity in research and must shun all that is less than completely ethical in scholarship.

In research, whether one is more inclined toward qualitative or quantitative inquiry, one must be able to say, as the Biblical Job, “Let me be weighed on honest scales, that God may know my integrity” (Job 31:6, NKJV). Qualitative research, with its innate flexibility and predispositions for subjectivity, can tempt the researcher to skirt ethical standards and stray from the path of integrity. Therefore, in qualitative studies the researcher must exercise special care for ethical behavior and demonstrate integrity from at least four perspectives: (1) moral fortitude, (2) academic and scholarly measure, (3) significance of the research for contribution to a knowledge base, and (4) value of the research findings for application to life (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

### **The Problem**

Many contend that qualitative research is incapable of meeting academic and public standards for ethics, integrity, and rigor; that it cannot stand up to scholarly and public scrutiny (Denzin in Lincoln & Denzin, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Patton, 2015). This challenge has lingered, and at times raged, in the academic world for decades. Right into the twenty-first century, its opponents have alleged that qualitative research is not generalizable and thus has no real value, is not trustworthy, lacks integrity of reliability, and cannot meet a range of ethical standards for validity. These charges put a heavy burden on the qualitative researcher to refute the accusations through the rigorous and conscientious practice of legitimate inquiry and trustworthy publication. Notwithstanding needs

for confidentiality, qualitative researchers should at all times be transparent in the practice and reporting of research. Qualitative researchers must consistently be prepared for being weighed on honest scales.

### **Background**

When Job made his declaration in his call for examination, he was declaring his readiness for God to judge his behavior and even his motives. He had nothing to hide (Nichol, 1977, pp. 184-185). He welcomed scrutiny on honest scales which then and now are symbolic of fair judgment (Dybdahl, 2010, p. 655). Since he had not acted inappropriately or practiced deceit, Job wished to be judged by a just or truthful measure. He was declaring his blamelessness. He invited an honest judgment that would reveal his integrity (Barry, 2012).

Essentially, directly or indirectly, this is what all researchers do when they share or publish their findings. Scholarship is made for scrutiny. It begs challenge and examination of design, content, method, evidence, findings, analyses, interpretations, and yes, even motives. To this end, it is imperative that qualitative researchers be clear on the definition, nature and processes of qualitative inquiry. This continues to be a formidable pursuit. It is difficult to define qualitative research precisely.

### **Cursory Review of the Literature**

This review will (1) shed light, albeit brief, on the nature of qualitative inquiry and related scholarship, and (2) briefly discuss current concerns regarding qualitative research and touching a bit on some of the historical perspectival trends towards qualitative research, (3) discuss ethics and integrity in research—particularly qualitative research, considering issues of reliability and validity, (4) share some principles acquired, and (5) propose general guidance and recommendations for ethical and integrous performance in qualitative research and scholarship.

### **Defining Qualitative Research**

In his review of Martyn Hammersley's 2013 book, *What is Qualitative Research?*, Keith Morrison (2014) declared, "Qualitative research is an amorphous, multi-dimensional field which forbids any easy single definition or set of definitions" (p. 328). Often attempts at defining qualitative research simply resort to comparing and contrasting qualitative research with quantitative research.

In a traditional fashion, Creswell (2014) summarizes "that qualitative research can be distinguished from quantitative methodology by numerous unique characteristics that are inherent in the design" (pp. 205-206). He provides a

synthesis of ten commonly articulated assumptions regarding the characteristics of qualitative research from the literature. (Note: Where there are contributions available in the supporting literature more recent than Creswell's original sources, they have been used in this study and cited here.)

1. Qualitative research occurs in natural settings, where human behavior and events occur (Charmaz, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).
2. Qualitative research is based on assumptions that are very different from quantitative designs. Theory or hypotheses are not established a priori (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
3. The researcher is the primary instrument in data collection rather than some inanimate mechanism (Eisner, 1991; Frankel & Wallen, 1990, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
4. The data that emerge from a qualitative study are descriptive. That is, data are reported in words (primary the participant's words) or pictures, rather than in numbers (Frankel & Wallen, 1990; Locke, et al., 1987, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 1989, 2016; Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
5. The focus of qualitative research is on participants' perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives (Frankel & Wallen, 1990, 2015; Locke, et al., 1987, 2014; Merriam, 1988, Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The attempt is therefore to understand not one, but multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
6. Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur (Frankel & Wallen, 1990, 2015).
7. Idiographic interpretation is utilized. In other words, attention is paid to particulars; and data is interpreted in regard to the particulars of a case rather than generalizations (Merriam, 1988; Charmaz, 2014; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
8. Qualitative research is an emergent design in its negotiated outcomes. Meaning and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects' realities than the researcher attempts to reconstruct (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
9. The research tradition relies on the utilization of tacit knowledge (intuitive and felt knowledge) because often the nuances of the multiple realities can be appreciated most in this way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, data are not quantifiable in the traditional sense of the word.

10. Objectivity and truthfulness are critical to both research traditions. However, the criteria for judging a qualitative study differ from quantitative research. First and foremost, the researcher seeks believability, based on coherence, insight and instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991) and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures (Patton, 2015).

Qualitative research is not a subfield of quantitative research. It can be better understood as a field of inquiry practice of its own genre. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) point out that, “A complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions surrounds the term” (p. 3), including “the traditions associated with foundationalism, positivism, postfoundationalism, postpositivism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, post-humanism, and the many qualitative research perspectives and methods connected to cultural and interpretive studies” (p.3). These imply the range of methodologies employed by qualitative researchers.

The qualitative researcher’s first tools are his or her eyes and ears. Qualitative researchers must first perceive the messages—both the obvious messages and hidden messages—of the site under study. Then they must interpret and translate them accurately. Erickson (2011) summarizes: “Qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and to describe in narrative reporting what particular people do in their everyday lives and what their actions mean to them. It identifies meaning-relevant kinds of things in the world . . . .” (p. 43). After the physical senses, qualitative research trusts opinion and perspective as tools in its processes.

Qualitative inquiry relies on mental analysis and synthesis as opposed to the mathematical formulas of quantitative research. It is experiential and personal. Creswell (2013) observes that, “The procedures of qualitative research, or its methodology, are characterized as interactive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data. The logic that the qualitative researcher follows is inductive, from the ground up, . . . .” (p. 22). Qualitative research is characteristically constructive.

### **Challenges to Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research by nature is subjective and ambiguous, and therefore, typically objections to qualitative research relate directly to its nature, and specifically its nature in comparison to the more familiar quantitative research paradigm. “The experimental (positivist) sciences (physics, chemistry, economics, and psychology, for example) are often seen as the crowning achievements of Western civilization, and in their practices, it is assumed that ‘truth’ can transcend opinion and personal bias” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 11). “Qualitative research is seen as an assault on this tradition” (Carey, 2009, p.104.).

Generally, there is a determined objection to qualitative research from proponents of the self-proclaimed hard sciences to maintain the distinctiveness and status of quantitative research. “But the positivist resistance to qualitative research goes beyond the ‘ever-present desire to maintain a distinction between hard science and soft scholarship’” (Carey, 2009, p. 99). Objections are more far reaching relating to legitimacy of perspective and trustworthiness of methods and reporting.

Although the debates have moved on to possibilities for mixed methods and designs based on which methods best fit the research task at hand, there are still reverberations of the old fundamental objections to qualitative research. Positivist communities still question or outright reject qualitative research for lacking scientific rigor with poor justification of the methods used, lack of transparency in the analytical procedures, and the findings being merely a collection of personal opinions subject to researcher bias (Simmons, 1987). These are historical charges, yet, today opponents continue to cite as their objections to qualitative research a variety of several typical criticisms, as summarized neatly by Kvale (1994) a generation ago:

1. It is not scientific, but only common sense.
2. It is not objective, but subjective.
3. It is not trustworthy, but biased.
4. It is not reliable, but rests upon leading questions.
5. It is not intersubjective; different interpreters find different meanings.
6. It is not a formalized method; it is too person-dependent.
7. It is not scientific hypothesis-testing; it is only explorative.
8. It is not quantitative, only qualitative.
9. It is not yielding generalizable results; there are too few subjects.
10. It is not valid, but rests on subjective impressions.

Those who support the hard sciences contend that qualitative research is a threat to scientific inquiry and its logic of objective, verifiable truths. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) observe that, “Positivists further allege that the so-called new experimental qualitative researchers write fiction, not science, and have no way of verifying their truth statements;” that it “signals the death of empirical science, and there is little to be gained by attempting to engage in moral criticism.” They view qualitative research “as an attack on reason and truth.” Conversely, they observe that the positivist attack on qualitative research is viewed by others as “an attempt to legislate one version of truth over another” (p. 2). At some levels of criticism, the objectives to qualitative inquiry take on political tones. Biases appear that suggest certain political agendas.

Dey and Nentwich (2006) introduced the concept they describe as the “identity politics of qualitative research.” Their studies found that postmodern scientific views have relegated qualitative research to a limited identity and a lower, supplementary status in the world of research. They argue that the differential in acceptance between quantitative and qualitative research is continuously reified as positivist worldviews apply quantitative research criteria to qualitative inquiry and thus press qualitative inquiry down to an inferior position. They contend for a “politics of difference” allowing for diversity of research perspective that would expand the parameters of acceptable research genres and styles to include qualitative methods (p.1).

At issue is knowledge about the world, and knowledge about the world is subject to worldview in its construction. All research seeks to extend or clarify knowledge about the world. So the challenge as it pertains to research is the provision of credible knowledge. Vidal (2008) shows that

A scientific worldview is mainly concerned with modelling the world, . . . and requires (a) explanatory power based and verified by (b) observational and experimental support. The requirement of an explanatory power (a) includes for example the ability to make predictions, but also the ability to connect consistently each new scientific theory to the rest of science. The empirical dimension furthermore requires that the predictions should be formulated in such a way that they can be tested, or falsified (Popper, 2002, in Vidal, 2008, p. 8).

One's worldview is developed from family and cultural background, education, and other life experiences. It determines perspective which in turn guides research decisions for focus, design, methodologies, and then findings, analyses, interpretation, and conclusions. This acknowledgement underscores Broad's (1958) historical assertion that non-scientific in worldview or research paradigm is not synonymous with un-scientific. Yet, even with the distinctions between non-scientific and un-scientific, there remain legitimate concerns to be addressed in qualitative research.

Current concerns regarding ethics and integrity in qualitative inquiry and scholarship demonstrate that, while specific foci have changed, the basic challenges to qualitative inquiry have changed little at their heart over the past 30 years. During the 1970s and 1980s, these challenges focused on “the politics and ethics of evidence and the value of qualitative work in addressing matters of equity and social justice” (Torrance, 2011, p. 569.). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2010) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010, 2003) chronicled three fairly discrete periods of paradigm struggles surrounding qualitative research.

- 1) The postpositivist-constructivist war against positivism in the 1970s-1990s
- 2) the conflict between competing postpositivist, constructivist, and critical theory paradigms from the 1990s to 2005
- 3) the current conflict between evidence-based methodologies and the mixed methods, interpretive, and critical theory schools from 2005-present (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, pp. 1-2).

Yet, today's most basic expressions of concern about the acceptability of qualitative research and scholarship still relate to issues of ethics and integrity, reliability and validity, and often generalizability.

### **Ethics and Integrity**

While related and often used interchangeably, ethics and integrity are not truly synonymous. Ethics has to do with following established rules, while integrity pertains to doing the right thing, regardless of the rule requirements (Patheos, 2016). Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) point out seven basic critical concerns for ethics and integrity in qualitative research:

1. Axiology (ethics and values)
2. Accommodation and commensurability (can paradigms be fitted into one another)
3. Action (what the researcher does in the world)
4. Control (who initiates inquiry, who asks questions)
5. Foundations of truth (foundationalism vs anti- and non-foundationalism)
6. Validity (traditional positivist models vs poststructural-constructivist criteria)
7. Voice, reflexivity, and postmodern representation (single versus multivoiced) (p. 91)

**Ethics.** In their consideration of ethical breakdowns in organizational methodical processes and operational choices, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) acknowledged the concept of "ethical fading," a phenomenon first described by Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004). They declare that this attrition of ethical standards, moral disengagement (Bandura, et. Al., 1996), "takes ethics out of consideration and even increases unconscious unethical behavior" (p. 2). They examine five barriers to ethical organizations. These easily apply to qualitative research, as well:

1. Ill-conceived goals
2. Motivated blindness



3. Indirect blindness
4. The slippery slope
5. Overvaluing outcomes (pp. 3-14)

The Oxford English Dictionary (2016) defines ethics as a set of moral principles, especially ones relating to or affirming a specified group, field, or form of conduct. Its synonyms include moral code, morals, morality, values, rights and wrongs, principles, ideals, standards (of behavior), value system, virtues, dictates of conscience.

Ethics is drawn from Greek philosophy and derives from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning character. It pertains to “norms of behavior presented in a systematic way demonstrating their internal, rational coherence” (Countryman, 2000, in Freedman, et al., 2000, p. 431). The closest Hebrew term, found in the Bible’s Old Testament, for ethics translates “virtue” or “ideals.” It is the word for “discipline” or “teaching” (See Proverbs 1:8) or the word for “way” or “path” of the good and the right. The closest parallel Greek term, found in the New Testament means “way of life” or “lifestyle” (See 2 Peter 3:11). The Greek term *ethos* appears 12 times in the New Testament (Luke 1:9; 2:42; 22:39; John 19:40; Acts 6:14; 15:1; 16:21; 21:21; 25:16; 26:3; 28:17; Heb. 10:25) and is usually translated “conduct,” “custom,” “manner of life,” or “practice” (Kaiser, 2003).

The academic discipline of ethics echoes these values in dealing with such questions as:

- What ought I do?
- How should I act so as to do what is good and right?
- What is meant by good?
- Who is the good person? (Kaiser, 2003, p. 513)

In his discussion of the definition and importance of ethics in research Resnik (2015, para. 1) observes that when most people think of ethics, they think of

- rules for distinguishing between right and wrong, such as the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"),
- a code of professional conduct like the Hippocratic Oath ("First of all, do no harm"),
- a religious creed like the Ten Commandments ("Thou Shalt not kill..."),
- wise aphorisms like the sayings of Confucius
- the most common way of defining "ethics": norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

The question is not whether there are or should be norms, but rather, whose norms and how are they applied in research. Resnik (2015) asserts, “All people recognize some common ethical norms but interpret, apply, and balance them in different ways in light of their own values and life experiences.” (para. 3). This is where worldview comes into play. Albeit, Fung (2015) observes that, “People can hold different ethical standards but ignoring the issue [of ethics] altogether is no longer viable” (p. 3). He further charges, research and its technologies are often at the heart of unethical practices in many walks of life. “In data science, a pattern of scandal has emerged. ... The people who collect, store, manage and process our data are not being held to any ethical standards” (Fung, 2015, pp. 1, 2). This strikes at the core of research, all research.

**Integrity.** According to The Oxford University Press (2016), integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles; it relates to moral uprightness. It is generally a personal choice to uphold oneself to consistently moral and ethical standards. In ethics, integrity is regarded by many as the honesty and truthfulness or accuracy of one's actions. It involves

- being straightforward and honest in professional and business relationships
- fair dealing and truthfulness
- not being associated with information that contains materially false or misleading statements or information furnished recklessly (Blomme, 2009)

Ashkenas (2011) declares that integrity is never easy and discusses two reasons for his declaration: (1) the innate ability for people to rationalize their behavior, and (2) differences in definitions of the concept of integrity. These he says, are “why solely relying on compliance functions, policies, rules, and audits—the integrity police—is usually inadequate” (Ashkenas, 2011, p. 3). The pursuit of integrity in behavior in any situation, including research, demands internal motivations that reach beyond external compliance points. Research integrity cannot be reduced to a checklist of dos and don'ts.

The National Institute of Health (2013) provides a clear and concise description of research integrity that includes requirements for (1) the use of honest and verifiable methods in proposing, performing, and evaluating research; (2) reporting research results with particular attention to adherence to rules, regulations, guidelines; and (3) following commonly accepted professional codes or norms (research ethics).

#### **Reliability, Validity, Generalizability**

Typically, along with issues of ethics and integrity, concerns for reliability, validity, and generalization loom large in considerations of qualitative research.

Noble and Smith (2015) pose a fundamental question: “Are the terms reliability and validity relevant to ensuring credibility in qualitative research?” (p. 34). Their answer to their own question is conclusive:

In their broadest sense these terms are applicable, with validity referring to the integrity and application of the methods and the precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data, and reliability describes consistency within the analytical procedures employed. However, as qualitative methods are inherently different from quantitative methods in terms of philosophical positions and purpose, alternative frameworks for demonstrating rigor are necessary. To this end Noble and Smith (2015) reference alternative criteria crafted by Lincoln and Guba for demonstrating rigor within qualitative research through truth value, consistency, neutrality, and applicability (p. 34).

**Reliability.** Certainly, an expectation for research reliability is reasonable, regardless of worldview and methodology. Reliability of research findings addresses the suitability and dependability or trustworthiness of the research in regards to its design and the methods it employs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). It relates to integrity of processes and outcomes. Therefore, the more appropriate question is, what type of reliability is expected of qualitative research? It must be followed closely by another question: How must this reliability be demonstrated? Although difficult in qualitative research, reliability of data and methods for data collection can be established to an acceptable degree. Rather than demonstrate reliability by statistical test, qualitative researchers rely upon rich, precise details in reporting their findings that can be confirmed and corroborated by others (Leung, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015).

**Validity.** Research validity on the other hand speaks to the strength, soundness, and power of the study design, methods and outcomes. This too is a reasonable expectation of research. Although problems of reliability threaten the credibility of qualitative research, validity may constitute its major strength (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982).

Qualitative studies can claim high internal validity derived from their data collection and analysis techniques (Denzin, 1978). The features of qualitative research that enhance internal validity include: (a) the researcher's long term involvement in the setting to collect data, (b) informant interviewing, (c) participant observation, and (d) researcher self-monitoring or disciplined subjectivity, that is continuous questioning and re-evaluation through the data collection process (Erickson, 1973). Creswell's (2016) strategies for achieving and demonstrating validity in qualitative research include: triangulation of data;

use of member checking—validation; use of rich, thick description; declaration and clarification of biases; presentation of negative or discrepant information; prolonged time in the field; use of peer debriefing; and use of an external auditor (p. 201-202).

**Generalizability.** Generalizability is conceptually different in qualitative research from that of quantitative research. Traditionally, “generalization, in research, refers to extending research results, conclusions, or other accounts that are based on a study of particular individuals, setting, times, or institutions to other individuals, settings, times, or institutions than those directly studied” (Polit & Beck, 2010, pp. 1451-1458 as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p. 136). In this sense, qualitative researchers can “rarely make explicit claims about the generalizability of their accounts” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137). According to Maxwell (1992, 2013), however, the distinction between internal and external generalizability is an important distinction for qualitative inquiry.

Qualitative internal generalizability pertains to the applicability or transfer of conclusions within the case, setting, or group studied, to others in the case that were not studied directly. External generalizability pertains to applications of research findings beyond the case that was studied to other persons, settings, etc. (Maxwell, 2013). Although there are exceptions, external generalizability is typically not the aim of qualitative research. While they can be used as pilots for larger, more externally generalizable studies, qualitative studies are not seen as representative studies. Rather they are designed for learning about a single case, setting, or group. In fact, “the value of a qualitative study may depend on its lack of external generalizability in the sense of being representative of a larger population...” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137).

Singer (in Maxwell, 2013, personal communication) proposes that qualitative research often has what she terms “face generalizability” in that “there is no obvious reason not to believe that the results apply more generally” (p. 138). Plausibility infers universality with similar situations and factors. These provide a level of credibility to generalizations from qualitative studies, but none permits precise extrapolation of results beyond the case studied. (Maxwell, 2015)

Nevertheless, generalization is sometimes used in qualitative research. “Qualitative generalization is a term that is used in a limited way in qualitative research, since the intent of this form of inquiry is not to generalize findings to individuals, sites, or places outside of those under study” (Creswell, 2014, p.203). The intent of qualitative research and the scholarship it produces are to provide detailed information sufficient for others to identify correlations to their own situation for the application of findings and recommendations. Readers can draw theoretical generalizations; that is, they can project expectations from a single case, for their similar situations. Often this is done for designing further research

or evaluation projects, or in developing goals, norms, or standards for operational plans.

### **Wisdom of Experience and Applications for Today's Qualitative Researcher**

Just as with research results, the value of this article lies in its applicability to real life situations, to inform future practice. In the spirit of qualitative research, it reflects on lessons learned. Patton (2015) observes regarding high-quality lessons learned, "The notion of identifying and articulating 'lessons learned' has become popular as a way of extracting useful and actionable knowledge from cross-case analyses. Rather than being stated in the form of traditional scientific empirical generalizations, lessons learned take the form of principles of practice that must be adapted to particular settings in which the principle is to be applied" (p. 714). Thus, these final pages will provide some lessons learned for going forward with qualitative research focusing on the issues raised.

### **Addressing Ethics Issues in Qualitative Research**

Most professions and organizations have well-defined codes of ethics for research engagement, including specific guidelines for all practices from "research participants' rights to inappropriate forms of researcher-participant relationships" (Miles, 2014, p. 58). Resnik (2015, para. 7-11) highlights reasons for adhering to ethical norms in research that shape perspective.

1. Norms promote the aims of research, such as knowledge, truth, and avoidance of error.
2. Since research often involves cooperation and coordination among many different people in different disciplines and institutions, ethical standards promote the values that are essential to collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness.
3. Ethical norms help to ensure that researchers can be held accountable to the public.
4. Ethical norms in research also help to build public support for research. People are more likely to fund a research project if they can trust the quality and integrity of research.
5. Norms of research promote other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility, human rights, animal welfare, compliance with the law, and public health and safety.

Unethical practice manifests in qualitative research in a number of ways? For example, outlined here along with guidance for correction, are ethical problems that can arise in constructivist inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 2013):

1. Participants, both observers and respondents, may deliberately introduce malconstructions. The hermeneutic/dialect process is itself probably the best, but sometimes not a complete, safeguard against such deceptions.
2. The inquirer may fail to set up the traditional safeguards: maintaining confidentiality, obtaining fully informed consent, guarding against harm, and protecting privacy. Such safeguards can probably best be provided through review by “human subjects committees,” which attend to legal and professional (as in codes of ethics) requirements.
3. The qualitative researcher may (or better yet, will) face special ethical challenges:
  - face-to-face contact makes privacy and anonymity within a site or research location difficult to maintain;
  - the need for trust is high but trust is difficult to achieve, is easily shattered, and frequently must be re-earned at regular intervals in a research context;
  - the nature of the qualitative research report almost precludes confidentiality, at least with respect to knowledgeable locals, since adequate description leads to sensible deductions regarding who is speaking (Lincoln and Guba, 2013, pp. 74-75).

Qualitative researchers must demonstrate a matured ethical sensitivity for best practice. They must constantly test their ethics and integrity with the following questions from the work of Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010), for example:

- What moral principles guide your research?
- How do ethical issues influence your selection of a research problem?
- How do ethical issues affect how you conduct your research—the design of your study, your sampling procedure, and so on?
- What responsibility do you have toward your research subjects? For example, do you have their informed consent to participate in your project?
- What ethical issues/dilemmas might come into play in deciding what research findings you publish?
- Will your research directly benefit those who participated in the study? (p. 59)

Qualitative researchers must remember that, as DuBois (2014) points out, “Rules about research misconduct do not bend before breaking” (p. 32). The wisdom of the Book of Ecclesiastes states this truth in a different way: What is crooked cannot be straightened (Eccl 1:5, NIV). So what can assure or enhance

ethical behavior? Experiences from organizational theory recommend, instead of focusing on the poor choices to avoid, focus on the positive virtues to exhibit (Rea, Kolp, Ritz, & Stewart, 2016). Best practices combine codified norms with a culture of integrity.

### **Addressing Integrity Issues in Qualitative Research**

For individuals, research integrity is an aspect of moral character and experience. It involves above all a commitment to intellectual honesty and personal responsibility for one's actions and to a range of practices that characterize responsible research conduct. These practices include honesty and fairness in proposing, performing, and reporting research (The National Academy of Sciences, 1995). Honesty and fairness are at the heart of research integrity in proposing, performing, and reporting research. A discussion of integrity in research naturally leads to considerations of reliability and validity.

**Addressing reliability in qualitative research.** Quantitative research reliability requires exact replicability of research processes and results. Conversely, the diverse paradigms of qualitative research render this definition of reliability “challenging and epistemologically counter-intuitive.” Consequently, the essence of reliability for qualitative research depends on consistency (Carcary, 2009; Grosseohme, 2014 in Leung, 2015). Silverman (2009, p. 472) offers five approaches for enhancing the reliability of process and results in qualitative research: (1) refutational analysis, (2) constant data comparison, (3) comprehensive data use, (4) inclusive of the deviant case, and (5) use of tables.

**Addressing validity in qualitative research.** Threats to validity are ever-present in qualitative research and cannot be ignored. Maxwell (2013) cautions that the qualitative researcher must “Remember that some validity threats are unavoidable;” and recommends that the researcher “will need to acknowledge these in [the] proposal or in the conclusions to [the] study, . . .” (p. 136). He observes that researchers are not expected “to have airtight answers to every possible threat” (p. 136). “The key,” he asserts, “is how plausible and how serious these unavoidable threats are” (p. 136). Acknowledgement and analyses of these threats are crucial.

In short the aim is credibility in and of qualitative research. “The techniques for assuring credibility include prolonged engagement; persistent observation; triangulation of sources, methods, theories, and researchers; peer debriefing; negative case analysis; referential adequacy; and member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 74). These strategies demand specific methodologies to increase possibilities of desired outcomes for trustworthiness—the qualitative equivalent to quantitative reliability and validity. Noble and Smith (2015) recommend:

- Accounting for personal biases which may influence findings;

- Acknowledging biases in sampling and ongoing critical reflection of methods to ensure sufficient depth and relevance of data collection and analysis;
- Meticulous record keeping, demonstrating a clear decision trail and ensuring interpretations of data are consistent and transparent;
- Establishing a comparison case and seeking out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure different perspectives are represented;
- Including rich and thick verbatim descriptions of participants' accounts to support findings;
- Demonstrating clarity in terms of thought processes during data analysis and subsequent interpretations;
- Engaging with other researchers to reduce research bias;
- Using respondent validation: includes inviting participants to comment on interview transcripts and whether the final themes and concepts created adequately reflect the phenomena being explored;
- Data triangulation whereby different methods, sources, and perspectives help produce a more comprehensive set of findings (pp. 34-35).

### **A Final Word**

My introduction and initial expedition into qualitative methods was in the mid-1980s when qualitative research seemed to come into its own for the social sciences and was making inroads of acceptability in education. At that time the major issues with qualitative research included

- legitimacy of qualitative research as a viable—ethical—mechanism for inquiry and scholarship
- integrity of qualitative research methods for data collection
- integrity of qualitative research methods for data analyses
- possibilities of demonstrating the reliability, validity, and generalizability in and of qualitative research (Simmons, 1987)

Essentially, these remain. Research consumers and practitioners, scholars and the public, expect to trust research findings as reliable and valid; and further they demand generalizability for applications to their real life situations and needs. They seek transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (2013) outline these three trustworthiness criteria as they summarize current expectations for qualitative research.



1. Transferability corresponds to the external validity criterion of positivism. Qualitative research is pressed to approximate conventional external validity or generalizability albeit by different measures to ensure that research findings will be applicable for different contexts or subjects. However, generalizability is not its aim; instead, determining the applicability of qualitative findings and interpretations is left to those who want to apply the findings and interpretations to different situations. Transferability is made possible through thick, rich descriptions of the research context and dynamics to allow readers to determine whether the findings are plausible for their contexts.
2. Dependability corresponds to the reliability criterion of positivism and addresses how the findings and interpretations could be determined to be an outcome of a consistent and dependable process. To achieve dependability, peer review or a designated person can be identified for verification of information. A colleague is engaged to review the inquiry process, data and information, findings, analyses and interpretations, and recommendations for accuracy and consistency.
3. Confirmability corresponds to the objectivity criterion of positivism and refers to how the findings and interpretations are a result of a dependable process of inquiry and data collection. The techniques for assessing confirmability include (1) audit, (2) triangulation, and (3) reflexive journals.

It is reasonable for all research to be trustworthy. Trustworthiness is an absolute for qualitative research with its typical twists and turns for which there must be clear demonstrations of ethical behavior. Yet, ethics is not always a subject of intentionality in research design. "Ethical discussions usually remain detached or marginalized from discussions of research projects. In fact, some researchers consider this aspect of research as an afterthought. Yet, the ethics and integrity of the researcher are a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and a researcher's findings are trustworthy and valid" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2010 p. 59). Strategies for maintaining ethical practices should be a standard of qualitative research design and assessment. This can serve to enhance the value of meandering journey.

1. Patton (2015) observes in his summary of the nature, niche, value, and fruit of qualitative research: "Start to finish is rarely, if ever, a simple, linear path. Be prepared for some major forks in the road, detours, emergent opportunities, disappointments, and thrills. For qualitative inquiry takes you into the world to experience and document the world, and the world, being multidimensional, multilayered, complex, dynamic, and enveloping will take you to places both planned and unplanned. It's an amazing journey because the world is an amazing place, offering

much to discover, much to ponder, and much to understand” (p. 37). Have no fear for “The integrity of the upright will guide them, . . . ” (Proverbs 11:3 NKJV). Therefore, let us always be open to the highest scrutiny: “Let me be weighed on honest scales, that God may know my integrity” (Job 31:6, NKJV).

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