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Preparing a Qualitative Research-Based Dissertation: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

In this article, a newly minted Ph.D. shares seven lessons learned during the process of preparing a dissertation based on qualitative research methods. While most of the lessons may be applicable to any kind of research, the writer focuses on the special challenges of employing a qualitative methodology. The lessons are: (1) Read, read, read; (2) Consult the experts; (3) Adhere to university regulations; (4) Pay attention to rigor and trustworthiness; (5) Give details of the methodology; (6) Don't be afraid to include numerical data; and (7) Prepare to publish.

Keywords

Confirmability, Credibility, Dependability, Grounded Theory, Inductive Analysis, Transferability, and Trustworthiness

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Preparing a Qualitative Research-Based Dissertation: Lessons Learned

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In this article, a newly minted Ph.D. shares seven lessons learned during the process of preparing a dissertation based on qualitative research methods. While most of the lessons may be applicable to any kind of research, the writer focuses on the special challenges of employing a qualitative methodology. The lessons are: (1) Read, read, read; (2) Consult the experts; (3) Adhere to university regulations; (4) Pay attention to rigor and trustworthiness; (5) Give details of the methodology; (6) Don't be afraid to include numerical data; and (7) Prepare to publish. Key Words: Confirmability, Credibility, Dependability, Grounded Theory, Inductive Analysis, Transferability, and Trustworthiness

As the new millennium dawned, I made a decision: I would reach for something seemingly beyond my grasp. That special something turned out to be a doctoral degree. However, even after I had fully embarked on that upward journey of discovery, I had no inkling of the methodological challenges that would mark many milestones on that journey.

A social research neophyte, I have spent my adult life honing my skills and developing expertise as a journalist and public relations practitioner. Over the years, I have researched and written numerous news stories, feature articles, general-interest columns, and special reports for newspapers, magazines, and radio.

Researching and writing a dissertation – particularly one based on qualitative research methods – demanded a different set of skills and offered some special challenges because of its nature and scope. In reflecting on that experience, I can identify various lessons learned along the way.

During coursework, I learned all the quantitative stuff: descriptive statistics, t-test procedures, univariate and multivariate analyses of variance, chi-square test, regression analysis, factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and the like. What's more, I developed facility in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Coursework also focused on basic matters like having a well-written research question; stating the purpose of the study (exploratory, descriptive, explanatory, or evaluative, or some combination); reviewing the literature thoroughly; and presenting a conceptual or theoretical framework for the study.

Guiding me on the early part of my journey, my statistics professor emphasized the “power” of numbers and the precision of measures characterizing quantitative studies. Like so many numbers-crunching researchers, my stats professor viewed qualitative research with suspicion. It seemed the good professor considered a methodology in which the generation of hypotheses often replaces the testing thereof, explanation replaces

measurement, and understanding replaces the making of generalizations as “airy fairy” (not “real”) research (Labuschagne, 2003).

Consequently, I became somewhat skeptical of this kind of research. In the end, though, I let the topic and goals of my research dictate the methodology. Fortunately, all four members of my dissertation committee (including the outgoing coordinator of the doctoral program) were enlightened enough to appreciate and support my choice of research methodology. Indeed, they emphasized the need for me to gather data reflecting the interactions and experiences of individuals and communities in relation to the research problem that I had identified. It was important to know quantitative research methodology and its assumptions, as well, so I could defend my choice of research design and methods. It is like preparing for a debate. To be effective, the debater had better know both (or all) sides of the issue. Before too long, it became clear to me that quantitative and qualitative research have distinct and complementary strengths. The main strength of qualitative research is that it yields data that provide depth and detail to create understanding of phenomena and lived experiences.

My current perspective is that of an emerging researcher who has been immersed in introspection as I reflect on where I have been and how I got there. I continue to favor methodological approaches whereby the behaviors and interactions of the research subjects are directly observed, and respondents are encouraged to tell their own stories and reflect on their day-to-day experiences. Such reflections can become useful qualitative data for researchers. Similarly, I have felt that my own reflection on my dissertation could produce a set of clear, flexible guidelines for fledgling researchers preparing a dissertation using qualitative methods. I was motivated to write about my experience so that inexperienced qualitative researchers would be better prepared to sort out some of the confusion and deal with the issues they are bound to face on what tends to be a lonely, uphill dissertation journey.

Exploratory Research

Mine was an exploratory qualitative study of social funds as an intervention strategy for poverty reduction. The World Bank-sponsored social fund program is designed to assist Third World countries in developing infrastructure and services and ultimately in improving living standards. In exploratory research, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, social phenomena are investigated with minimal a priori expectations in order to develop explanations of these phenomena.

A qualitative mode of social work enquiry was deemed appropriate for answering the research questions. The questions addressed the characteristics of poverty-focused social fund projects; the nexus of poverty reduction and three key concepts suggested by the literature – *community (citizen) participation*, *social capital*, and *empowerment*; and the impact of the projects on poverty. Previous studies of social funds were mainly impact assessments by evaluators of the World Bank. For the most part, those studies looked at “big-picture” issues concerning social funds at the institutional level and, in the process, generated table after table of numerical data. In my view, those studies gave insufficient attention to the dynamics of social funds that might have an impact on poverty in local communities.

Hence, my study was designed to provide a better understanding of social funds as a poverty reduction mechanism by focusing on the qualitative aspects of community structures, processes, and programs. Interview questions elicited data on community members' roles, the outcomes of social fund projects, the community's external relations, problems and challenges, and individual satisfactions. By identifying characteristics of poverty-focused projects, my study has strengthened the knowledge base on which decisions can be made about shaping future projects to meet community needs. By exploring poverty-related concepts and themes, the study has drawn attention to some important dynamics that prevail in a beneficiary community.

Further, my study fit into the framework of "naturalistic" ontology. Naturalistic research includes the following characteristics: natural setting (to keep realities in their contexts), qualitative methods, purposive sampling, inductive analysis, grounded theory, case study reporting mode, tentative application of findings, and special criteria of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A qualitative method was considered appropriate for an analysis of concepts and themes derived from an exploration of social funds, about which relatively little was known and about which in-depth understanding was desired.

In the process of preparing my research proposal and the dissertation itself, I learned many valuable lessons. These lessons should interest doctoral students engaged in qualitative research as well as faculty who teach qualitative research methods or supervise students conducting qualitative studies. The ideas presented in this paper can serve as guidelines for the dissertation process so that committee members may become more sensitive to the needs of doctoral students, and students may avoid pitfalls along the dissertation path. Now, let me share with you the seven principal lessons learned while I was preparing my dissertation.

Lesson 1: Read, Read, Read

The first lesson I learned was to read extensively and then read some more. Sure, this applies to any research undertaking. After all, one needs to know what research exists and how others have treated a particular topic so one can determine what additional research is needed. Prior studies provide a foundation, background, and context for new research; it establishes a bridge between the (proposed) research project and the extant knowledge base.

I read ravenously. I devoured journal articles and textbook material. Day after day, I pored over exemplary qualitative studies. More and more, I learned to read with a critical eye; to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the article or book chapter; and to look for gaps in the literature, both theoretical and empirical. Long after my committee had signed off on my dissertation proposal, I continued my literature search. If I were to dispense some advice to those who come after me, it would be this: Even during the fieldwork phase of your study, keep reading.

In general, as I perused the literature, I sought to identify the purpose of the study and the author's approach to achieving that purpose. In particular, I noted the review of prior literature; the theoretical framework and concepts germane to this framework; the study design (cross-sectional or longitudinal), methods, and instruments; and, of course, the research findings. In my mind were critical questions such as these: What were the

units of analysis, and how were they selected? How clearly were the data presented and discussed? What interpretations and conclusions were drawn from the findings?

In one of my doctoral seminars, we looked at the three principal research paradigms: positivistic, interpretive, and critical. Hungry for more, I spent several days in the library and came away satisfied. I then sharpened my focus to examine the epistemology, ontology, and methodology of qualitative research. One of the primary objectives of the methodology, as I understood it, is to develop theory or refine concepts. I learned, too, that the language of the qualitative methodology is marked by such words as “exploration,” “meaning,” “naturalistic,” “thematic,” and “understanding.”

As I read, critical thinking would always come into play. I would interpret and infer, analyze, and evaluate. It was clear to me that critical thinking required open-mindedness in examining diverse ideas, persistence in seeking answers to crucial questions, and prudence in making judgments and reaching conclusions. I kept reading, as I did not know what new insights I would derive from the literature at any stage of the dissertation preparation process. In the process, question after question crept into my mind: How can I best organize information, synthesize results, and write my critical appraisal of the literature? Am I demonstrating the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies? Will the readers of my dissertation find the literature review relevant, appropriate, and useful? As I read, I would start to see how salient ideas and key concepts connect; and, eureka, I would occasionally even feel the sudden impact of insight and discovery – what Gestalt psychologists call the “Aha! experience.”

That experience repeated itself in the “saturation” process, as I connected data from the field with concepts in the literature (see Lesson 5). For example, after I had examined some data on the social processes in my study communities, I returned to the literature and found that the data did not illustrate empowerment, after all. (Empowerment was included as a “sensitizing concept” in the theoretical framework of my study.) The data suggested such sub-themes as “voicing common concerns,” “focusing on the common good,” and “emphasizing collective responsibility.” In the literature, I came across relevant theoretical constructs described in these terms: “concerns that go beyond the purview of any particular party,” “mutually beneficial relationship,” “common goals,” and “shared responsibility” (see, for example, Chrislip & Larson, 1994, p. 5). Aha! What the findings of my research were pointing to was not empowerment, but collaboration!

Traditions and methods

On my journey of discovery, the five major qualitative research traditions loomed large: biography, case study, ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology (Creswell, 1998). I familiarized myself with all of them and eventually picked grounded theory, with case study becoming a product, rather than a method, of my research. Further, the most popular qualitative research methods are interviews, observation, and (archival) document studies. As I explain later, I used all three methods in my research.

Doctoral students interested in qualitative research should become familiar with such names as Juliet Corbin, Norman Denzin, Barney Glaser, Egon Guba, Yvonna Lincoln, Michael Quinn Patton, and Anselm Strauss (see, for example, Patton, 1980).

These are the pioneers and pacesetters, the movers and shakers of qualitative research. These authors' seminal work has shaped the qualitative methodology and provides exemplars to new researchers. Denzin and Lincoln's 2003 volume, *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, includes helpful chapters on case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, and participatory action research, among others. Glaser and Strauss wrote their pioneering book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, in 1967; Strauss and Corbin refined grounded theory in 1990. Because of its comprehensive, illustrative treatment of the subject, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* became my bible and constant companion during my dissertation journey.

Relatively new on the scene, Deborah Padgett has been contributing to the ongoing debate about the paradigms, principles, and procedures of qualitative research. Novices will benefit by perusing Padgett's primer on qualitative methods (Padgett, 1998). A new, particularly useful book for learners of the methodology is *The Qualitative Research Experience* (Padgett, 2004). It includes current research and the latest developments in qualitative methodology. There are chapters on grounded theory, narrative analysis, ethnography, case study research, mixed methods in a dissertation study, and evaluation research, plus a whole section on pertinent methodological issues.

By reading a variety of scholarly articles, I was able to compile a comprehensive annotated bibliography and table of studies, and as a consequence, the literature review in my 184-page dissertation reflected both depth and breadth of coverage. Reviewers thought the cited literature was seminal, appropriate, and timely. One reviewer thought I had shown my "ability to critically engage with (rather than merely summarize) relevant literature." Besides (and this is my own assessment), I had learned to "cite to excite."

A major benefit of extensive, thorough reading became evident after I had completed my dissertation: I was able to measure the extent to which my research findings would expand the body of literature on the topic of my study. In the process, I was able to ensure my own self-improvement. Significantly, by becoming a veritable consumer of research, I was quickly becoming a producer of research. The more I read research reports, the more I wanted to conduct research and write my own reports. However, because there are many demands on my time, I've been forced to make haste slowly.

Lesson 2: Consult the Experts

In the course of my study, I learned to consult the experts, primarily my dissertation committee. Members of my committee provided the necessary oversight for my dissertation: All phases of my research were subject to their scrutiny and review. They were my consultants and advisors, and I was quite fortunate that they also played the role of mentors, providing counsel and guidance along the way.

Committee members provided critical comments on my dissertation drafts, particularly on the methodology chapter and the data analysis section, thus helping to make the research process transparent and rigorous. They made it clear that I should assume that even they, as the first readers of my dissertation, knew little or nothing about my topic, why and how I was studying it, and its ramifications for theory and practice in my field (social welfare).

It seemed method mattered most. When my committee emphasized that I needed to explain every decision I made in the research process, I wondered whether I would become so preoccupied with method that the substantive findings would become obscure. Regardless, I was motivated by a spirit of determination to “give them what they want.” But, more important, I knew that my committee members had the depth of experience and the wisdom that comes with years of interaction with similar topics and with several doctoral students. Their knowledge, expertise, and advice guided me through the dissertation process; ensured that my dissertation reflected sufficient depth of intellect; and made the path to my doctorate much smoother than it otherwise would have been.

Recently, I have been hearing some of the horror stories about dissertation committees and the nightmares they can create for doctoral students and candidates. To address some of the problems students face, changes to committee composition sometimes may be in order. However, I would caution against hasty changes. I took five months to decide that I really needed to ask one of my committee members to step down. That professor kept dwelling on one small section of my literature review and I was not reassured that he appreciated the merit of my approach to the proposed study. After countless e-mails, back and forth, and a couple of meetings, I realized that I was engaged with a professor whose suggestions for shaping my dissertation were not consistent or in line with my hopes and aspirations. Therefore, I respectfully proposed a parting of ways. Whew!

In my view, once there is overall agreement on expectations, procedures, and timelines, the student/candidate should persevere, constantly keeping committee members apprised of developments in the research process and seeking their support. I learned that doctoral students should welcome their committee’s assessments and advice. Students disregard such assessments and advice at their own peril.

If the required qualitative research expertise is not available on one’s campus, one should look elsewhere. In my case, I participated in a two-day workshop in the nation’s capital where I rubbed shoulders with the experts and picked their brains. At the Washington workshop, I learned how to code data using qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, to develop grounded theory, and to use strategies for rigor. Moreover, I came away with a blueprint for my own study.

Lesson 3: Adhere to University Regulations

I learned that although it probably goes without saying, it could not be overemphasized: Doctoral students should adhere to the regulations and guidelines prescribed by the university for the preparation of theses and dissertations. Apart from those related to content and organization and overall formatting requirements, relevant regulations include those set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which concerns itself with the maintenance of ethical standards and the protection of human research subjects.

In this regard, my first step was to complete a computer-based training course on Protecting of Human Research Subjects, as certified by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Human Subjects Research. Subsequently, I attached a carefully crafted consent letter (which I would read to respondents prior to conducting my interviews) and my research proposal to the IRB-prescribed form, which I submitted for approval. It was

smooth sailing for me because the IRB deemed my research “exempt” as it presented “no known or minimal risks” and involved “procedures for which [respondents’] written consent is not normally required outside of the research context.” Understandably, research involving “special populations,” such as children, persons with disabilities, and persons in institutions, could create hurdles in the approval process.

Informed consent is certainly an important feature of ethical considerations in any research involving human subjects. The basic elements of informed consent are the following: a brief description of the study and its procedures; full identification of the researcher’s identity; an assurance that participation is voluntary and that the respondent has the right to withdraw at any time without penalty; an assurance of confidentiality; and benefits and risks associated with participation in the study.

Accordingly, a subsection of the dissertation should identify the ethical implications (large or small) of the research undertaken and should show that all the necessary precautions have been taken to protect the rights and well-being of the research subjects. Among the specific details should be a description of how informed consent was obtained; how the subjects’ identities and data confidentiality are being protected; and how other pertinent ethical questions (e.g., researcher loyalties, impact of funding sources, and use of results) have been addressed.

From an ethical standpoint, risks and concerns are greater in qualitative research than in quantitative research. This is mainly because of the close involvement of the researcher with the research process and with the participants. Qualitative researchers often become immersed in the life of respondents. Ethical concerns arise also because qualitative research offers considerable interpretive latitude to the researcher and the data are, on a whole, rife with personal opinions and feelings.

It is essential, then, that attention is paid to the institutional guidelines and procedures for dealing with human subjects. Furthermore, a certain critical distance between the researcher and the respondent is necessary for the maintenance of data integrity. I have been told that doctoral students sometimes feel constrained to compromise some values. As for me, I recall that while analyzing data, I was tempted (at least initially) to give more weight to data elicited from well-positioned persons at the study sites than from other respondents. I struggled a bit with the notion that these were the real decision makers; that what they said and did was what really mattered. However, I did not yield to temptation. It was more important for me to attempt to make sense of phenomena in the context of the meanings they have in “ordinary” people’s lives. Also, I took the necessary precautions to avoid imposing my beliefs and biases on the data.

Lesson 4: Pay Attention to Rigor and Trustworthiness

Early in the research process I became keenly aware of the importance of providing checks and balances to maintain acceptable standards of scientific inquiry. In effect, the need for rigorous data collection and analytic methods had to be addressed.

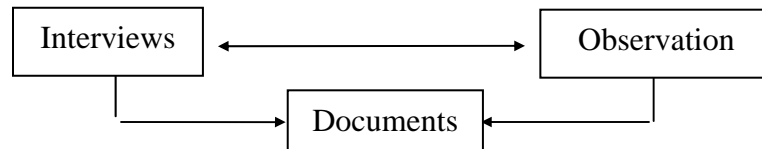
Padgett (1998) enumerates and elaborates on six strategies for enhancing the rigor of the research:

- Prolonged engagement
- Triangulation

- Peer debriefing and support
- Member checking
- Negative case analysis
- Auditing

In my research, I employed no fewer than four of those strategies. However, I put emphasis on triangulation; employing various methods and tapping various sources for data (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Triangulation by method.



Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers, who frame their studies in an interpretive paradigm, think in terms of trustworthiness as opposed to the conventional, positivistic criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). Denzin and Lincoln suggest that four factors be considered in establishing the trustworthiness of findings from qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, which refers to the confidence one can have in the truth of the findings, can be established by various methods. My three methods of choice were triangulation, member checking, and negative case analysis. With regard to triangulation, I ferreted out data from multiple sources through multiple methods – in particular, interviews (supplemented with data from key informants), non-participant observation, and document reviews. Triangulation is a means of corroboration, which allows the researcher to be more confident of the study conclusions.

Interviews were time-consuming, but were my main data-gathering method. During the field research, what went through my mind was that I simply could not afford to rush through the interviews or skirt around the issues. And when the time came for me to draw upon the interviews for my research report, I was at pains to ensure that I was not offering a cure for insomnia. I did that by constructing a compelling narrative and including it in the appendix. The parts of the narrative that illustrated emerging themes found their way into the Results chapter, which I knew had to be more than a good story well told. Field observation was done during the same period in which the interviews were conducted, with the observer role being supplementary to the interviewer role. I had to determine how what was observed (the “permanent products” or visible outputs of the social fund projects) stacked up against what was said in interviews. The easiest part of the research process was the document reviews, which I did at home. Approximately 40 documents were eventually reviewed and coded for analysis.

Member checking, which involved telephoning respondents to check the accuracy of facts and observations, took place as data collection segued into data analysis. Crosschecking helped me maintain reflexivity by encouraging self-awareness and self-correction. After the initial write-up of the study, feedback on some of the findings was sought in the field from the organizers of the community-based projects I studied as well as from community residents who did not participate as interview respondents. At least two persons from each research site were asked to confirm the accuracy of my observations. They were also asked to comment on whether my interpretations (embodied in a substantive theory) rang true and were meaningful to them. This process provided participant validation of the findings.

In qualitative research, negative case analysis enhances rigor and is used in the quest for verification (Padgett, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In my study, negative case analysis involved a reexamination of every case, after the initial analysis was completed, to see whether the characteristics or properties of the emergent themes were applicable to all cases. When it was determined that there were no negative cases or disconfirming evidence, the analysis was considered complete.

Transferability means, in essence, that other researchers can apply the findings of the study to their own. To provide for transferability, my study presented findings with “thick” descriptions of the phenomena.

Dependability refers to the stability of the findings over time and confirmability to the internal coherence of the data in relation to the findings, interpretations, and recommendations (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). An audit trail can be used to accomplish dependability and confirmability simultaneously (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). For my study, a master’s-prepared student at another university, who demonstrated his understanding of the research process and the coding method of analysis, followed the trail, starting with the transcriptions and ending with the theory. Differences in our perspectives were easily resolved. It was only when the “auditor” and I reached overall agreement about my analysis, as reflected along the trail, that I was satisfied that my study was sound with respect to the findings and conclusions.

Lesson 5: Give Details of the Methodology

One of the primary lessons I learned as I prepared my dissertation was that details are not just necessary but vital. The researcher should spell out the methodology in detail to make the process as transparent as possible (which is what I do in the next few paragraphs). A research instructor stressed the importance of outlining the conceptual or theoretical framework of the study. It is important, as well, to provide a theoretical rationale for the selection of central concepts and to define these concepts in operational terms. Details should also include the population of interest, the research subjects and how they were recruited or selected for the study, and the units of analysis. It is especially important to give details of the data collection methods and instruments as well as the data analysis techniques and procedures.

Sampling

Qualitative research such as mine, which stressed in-depth investigation in a small number of communities, uses purposive sampling as opposed to random sampling. Because the emphasis is on quality rather than quantity, the objective was not to maximize numbers but to become “saturated” with information on the topic (Padgett, 1998, p. 52). I specified the criteria used to select sites for the study, which included manageability in terms of the number of sites, accessibility of the community and the residents (i.e., prospective respondents), and the willingness of respondents to speak freely with the interviewer.

Data collection

My primary data collection method was in-depth, open-ended interviews, for which I used an interview guide that I had prepared. Key informants provided supplementary data.

The use of the interview guide indicated that there was some structure to the interviews, even though they were treated as conversations during which the interviewer drew out detailed information and comments from the respondents. “One way to provide more structure than in the completely unstructured, informal conversational interview, while maintaining a relatively high degree of flexibility, is to use the interview guide strategy” (Patton as cited in Rubin & Babbie, 2001, p. 407). More structure eases the researcher’s task of organizing and analyzing interview data. It also helps readers of the research report judge the quality of the interviewing methods and instruments used.

Additional data collection methods were non-participant observation of organization/community conditions and processes and reviews of documents related to the communities, organizations, and projects included in the study. Archival research included both electronic (i.e., Internet-based) and hard-copy issues of newspapers in addition to minutes and reports of meetings, letters, and similar documents.

Data analysis

The analysis of interview transcripts and field notes was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1980, p. 306).

The grounded theory method was employed in my study. “A grounded theory is one that is inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23).

Further, a constructivist-interpretive paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) underpinned my study. In line with this approach, the investigator’s interpretation of events and situations involving local community actors provided the building blocks for theory construction. A constructivist-interpretive paradigm produces substantive-formal theory grounded in the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Substantive theory is developed for a substantive or an empirical area of inquiry; formal theory is developed for a formal or a conceptual area of inquiry.

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) whereby line, sentence, and paragraph segments of the transcribed interviews and field notes were reviewed to decide what codes fit the concepts suggested by the data. The interview data were given more weight in the analysis than were the non-participant observation and the document reviews. Each code was constantly compared to all other codes to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. My dissertation contained a detailed description of the coding process.

In sum, data were reduced and analyzed by means of thematic codes and concepts in a three-level process. Themes gradually emerged as a result of the combined process of becoming intimate with the data, making logical associations with the interview questions, and considering what was learned during the initial review of the literature. At successive stages, themes moved from a low level of abstraction to become major, overarching themes rooted in the concrete evidence provided by the data. These emerging themes together with a substantive-formal theory of “development-focused collaboration” became the major findings of my study.

Qualitative data analysis programs

Available qualitative data analysis (QDA) programs included ATLAS.ti, The Ethnograph, HyperQual, HyperRESEARCH, NUD*IST, and NVivo. A seminar stimulated my interest in the ATLAS.ti QDA software, and I ended up using it in my dissertation research for data organization and management (ATLAS.ti, 1999).

Specifically, I used ATLAS.ti for assigning open codes (substantive “labels”), including in vivo codes (respondents’ exact words) as well as to create coding/analytical memos (analysis of codes and themes related to theory formulation). My notes on important coding decisions formed part of the analytical memos. The ATLAS.ti “families” editing option and search features helped pull together, at the second level of coding (creating “axial” codes), passages identified by a user-defined set of codes representing concepts from the data that had some features in common. Third-level (“selective”) codes were essentially theoretical constructs (sub-themes) created by connecting and consolidating second-level codes and at the same time, abstracting from the evidence contained in the data.

Limitations of the study

The study’s limitations – in terms of design, methods, and findings – should be specified. Limitations may include threats to trustworthiness, and a major threat to trustworthiness could be respondents’ biases. For instance, respondents may say what they think the researcher wants to hear and paint positive pictures of situations that are not altogether positive. The research report should indicate how devices were employed to reduce such bias and its effects on the collecting and analyzing of empirical evidence.

With respect to the document reviews that formed one of my data collection methods, I noted, for example:

Documents were incomplete and selective, in that only certain aspects of the project or of the sponsoring organization were documented (i.e., positive aspects). In many cases, the documents were uneven, with great detail on some project components or activities and virtually nothing on others. Nevertheless, documents were useful in providing a behind-the-scenes look at some aspects of the project and follow-up activities that were not observed. Additionally, they supplied leads for asking appropriate questions that were not included in the interview guide. Therefore, as incomplete and uneven as they were, the reviewed documents supplemented the interview data and thus served a useful purpose. (Bowen, 2003a, p. 57)

The research report should explain how the limitations are to be seen and should balance the limitations with the contributions of the study. Does the study expand the body of literature on the dissertation topic? Does it offer useful information and recommendations to be considered by researchers, policy-makers, and/or practitioners? In answering these questions, the investigator should highlight applicable implications for research, policy, and practice.

Lesson 6: Don't Be Afraid to Include Numerical Data

Simply put, qualitative data involve words while quantitative data come in the form of numbers. In qualitative research, findings do not result from statistical procedures, correlations, and similar mathematical calculations; instead, they come from an interpretation of non-numerical or largely text-based data. Yet, numerical data have a place in qualitative studies; they should be included where available and where appropriate.

Appropriateness has to do with whether numbers do a good job of representing data for analysis, and whether, in a particular instance, a numerical summary works as well as (if not better than) verbiage. Numbers displayed in a table can go a far way in breaking the monotony of words on a page and can give the research report a more "scientific" appearance.

In my dissertation, I included the number of respondents, interviews conducted, and documents reviewed, as well as community population figures and monetary allocations to projects in a set of tables profiling each social fund project and the beneficiary community. My qualitative research also produced numerical data in the form of "socioeconomic capacity" scores. These scores, reflecting the level of education and employment among community leaders, were summarized in a table. (Socioeconomic capacity was a measure of social capital, which was a sensitizing concept identified in my dissertation.)

It bears repetition that numerical data have a place in qualitative reports. However, numbers should not be included just for the sake of including them.

Lesson 7: Prepare to Publish

Finally, during the dissertation process, I learned the importance of preparing to publish my work. That is a lesson every researcher should learn well.

The findings of original research, especially cutting-edge research, should be made available in the public domain. In addition to presentations at conferences and colloquia of professional organizations, journal articles and even books may be viable products of a dissertation. The research results could be a significant addition to the existing literature, providing answers to questions or offering new insights. The results should be disseminated among people most likely to benefit from them.

Although an Internet search indicates that not many journals nowadays discriminate in favor of studies conducted by quantitative researchers, I constantly bear in mind that not every journal welcomes research using solely qualitative approaches. It stands to reason that qualitative researchers have a better chance of seeing their submissions in print if they look for qualitative research-friendly journals or journals (like this one) that specialize in publishing qualitative studies.

Many scholarly, refereed journals are published by professional organizations. The journal of the organization to which the researcher belongs is a good place to start the authorship experience. Prospective authors should be aware of the anonymous peer-review process, which puts the focus on the manuscript, instead of on the author. As I have learned, the review process is slow, painfully slow. It could take two months just to get an initial editorial response; six or seven months to find out whether your proposed article has been accepted or rejected; and well over a year before your submission sees the light of day as a journal article.

In preparing papers for publication, authors should be mindful of both the form and the substance of the manuscript. Journals provide guidelines for authors, which should be followed carefully. Browsing abstracts of articles in targeted journals is also a good idea, as it will indicate the types of articles those journals typically publish. It is helpful to contact the appropriate editor to determine the fit between your proposed article and the journal to which it is being submitted. This can save a great deal of time, expenses, and other resources; and it can prevent frustration for the would-be author.

Here is one important piece of advice I received from an experienced author: The manuscript should include liberal references to the experts who provide guidelines for the kind of research being reported. For example, for grounded theory, cite Glaser and Strauss. (They are, after all, the founders of grounded theory.) I try to cite at least one article from an issue of the journal to which I am submitting a paper for consideration, suggesting to the editors that I have read their journal and find it appropriate and worthwhile.

There is no need to wait until the dissertation is completed before preparing a paper. A literature synthesis, for example, may be interesting enough to merit publication. To be sure, I ended up with a published piece while I was engaged in my field research. The article was, in essence, a critical review of the literature that provided a basis for my dissertation research project (Bowen, 2003b).

Some submissions will likely be rejected; few, if any, are accepted without reviewers' recommendations for revision. Prospective authors are advised to research the acceptance/rejection rates of various journals. The acceptance rates, I've been told, can

range from 80 percent to 5 percent. The University of Wisconsin (n.d.) has a useful guide, *Who Publishes What*, which lists reference books that include acceptance rates for periodicals in various disciplines (see <http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/Memorial/whopubs.htm>). Prestigious, high-quality journals usually have low manuscript acceptance rates, and journals that have very high submission rates have correspondingly high rejection rates.

The review process can yield valuable suggestions on how to revise and ultimately improve the manuscript, which should be treated as a work in progress until it gets published. If a manuscript is rejected, it should be revised and submitted elsewhere. (By the way, two of the three papers I have written based on my dissertation have been accepted for publication, while the other is at the “revise and resubmit” stage.)

Bear in mind that, by and large, professional advancement (i.e., promotion and tenure) in the academy demands an impressive list of publications in a curriculum vita. Clearly, in a world of “publish or perish,” this lesson is key: Prepare to publish.

To summarize, my qualitative research-based dissertation has yielded seven major lessons: (1) Read, read, read; (2) Consult the experts; (3) Adhere to university regulations; (4) Pay attention to rigor and trustworthiness; (5) Give details of the methodology; (6) Don’t be afraid to include numerical data; and (7) Prepare to publish.

In conclusion, my dissertation “journey” also served as an apprenticeship during which I developed as a researcher and writer for scholarly publications. I learned from the experts and garnered the tools I needed to make continued engagement in qualitative research a rich and rewarding experience.

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