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Claire M. Leitch, Frances M. Hill and Richard T. Harrison

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The Philosophy and Practice of Interpretivist Research in Entrepreneurship Quality, Validation, and Trust

Claire M. Leitch

Frances M. Hill

Richard T. Harrison

Queen's University Management School

Knowledge production in entrepreneurship requires inclusivity as well as diversity and pluralism in research perspectives and approaches. In this article, the authors address concerns about interpretivist research regarding validity, reliability, objectivity, generalizability, and communicability of results that militate against its more widespread acceptance. Following the nonfoundationalist argument that all observation is theory-laden, context specific, and that there are no external criteria against which to assess research design and execution and the data produced, the authors propose that quality must be internalized within the underlying research philosophy rather than something to be tested upon completion. This requires a shift from the notion of validity as an outcome to validation as a process. To elucidate this, they provide a guiding framework and present a case illustration that will assist an interpretivist entrepreneurship researcher to establish and demonstrate the quality of their work.

Keywords: *entrepreneurship; interpretivist research; quality; validation*

Introduction

Although entrepreneurship has developed substantially over the past 25 years (Cornelius, Landström, & Persson, 2006), it remains a field still seeking legitimacy (Bruyat & Julian, 2001; Busenitz et al., 2003). A contributing factor is the breadth of the field, reflected in the recently agreed domain statement of the Entrepreneurship Division of the Academy of Management (Academy of Management, 2007). This defines entrepreneurship as, “the creation and management of new businesses, small businesses and family businesses, and the characteristics and special problems of entrepreneurs.” While this definition is permissive, allowing researchers to investigate entrepreneurship in a manner that fits their interests (Brush, Manolova, & Edelman, 2008; Davidsson, Low, & Wright, 2001), some authors

Authors' Note: The authors wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the Guest Editor of this Special Issue for their time and very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article. Please address correspondence to Frances Margaret Hill, 25 University Square, Belfast, Northern Ireland, BT7 1NN, United Kingdom; e-mail: f.hill@qub.ac.uk.

caution that it also dissipates the focus of entrepreneurship research into a fragmented potpourri (Gartner, 2001; Harrison & Leitch, 1996) that is constraining both the field's scholarly development and its credibility as an academic discipline (Grégoire, Noël, Déry, & Béchar, 2006).

Accordingly, some scholars call for convergence, the “linear accumulation of knowledge which comes from a widely shared ‘paradigm’, i.e., a set of assumptions about a field’s object of study, method of investigation, explanatory model, and overall interpretation scheme” (Grégoire et al., 2006, p. 334). This derives from the belief that “as an intellectual field matures, it becomes increasingly characterized by a set of codified theories, models, methods, and/or measures – which are to direct ongoing research” (Grégoire et al., 2006, p. 335). Moreover, they believe that in entrepreneurship this will be achieved through the systematic adoption of a research paradigm characterized by a commitment to theory building and testing in a hypothetico-deductive framework using quantitative methods to analyze large data sets and establish generalizable findings (Davidsson, 2003). This hegemonic, objectivist view necessitates, among other things, agreement on methods and techniques and is problematic for two main reasons. First, it makes the assumption that all disciplines should evolve according to the Kuhnian paradigmatic pattern of “normal” science. However, this appears to ignore Kuhn’s own belief that the human sciences (as he termed them) have not yet reached the stage where there is a dominant paradigm within which normal science progresses (Kuhn, 1996). Second, the argument for convergence in entrepreneurship research is predicated on a belief that it is a discipline in which knowledge is constituted as it is in the natural sciences. Yet, entrepreneurship is a multifaceted, complex social construct that is enacted in many different contexts by a variety of actors. Therefore, we propose that the production of rich, in-depth knowledge requires researchers to adopt diverse ontological and epistemological positions, as well as draw on a range of theoretical and practice traditions from both the social sciences and the humanities (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, & Locke, 2008; Gephart, 2004).

Consequently, in relation to advancing the field, instead of convergence, which limits the types of questions that can be addressed, we argue for inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism in research perspectives and approaches. This is not to suggest that “anything goes.” On the contrary, to develop knowledge and understanding of entrepreneurship all research, positivist and interpretivist, must be robust and characterized by integrity and trustworthiness. The means of achieving and assessing such characteristics are well established and documented for positivist research. However, the central issues addressed in this article are, how can interpretivist entrepreneurship research be undertaken in a manner that creates knowledge equal in validity to that of objectivist social science and how can this equivalence become recognized and accepted in the entrepreneurship domain?

Where possible, we use the term “interpretivist” to describe nonpositivist research concerned with the investigation of social reality (Stahl, 2007). Furthermore, we adopt a methodological perspective, that is, we are concerned with “the theory of how research should be undertaken including the theoretical and philosophical assumptions upon which research is based and the implications of these for the method or methods adopted” (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2007, p. 602). Thus, except where used by others, we have avoided the term “qualitative” research which in entrepreneurship tends merely to refer to methods, that is, procedures, and techniques used to obtain and analyze research data.

The remainder of this article discusses ontology, epistemology, and methodology in entrepreneurship research. It examines the issue of research quality and discusses it in the context of both positivism and interpretivism. We propose validation as a process for establishing and assessing the quality of interpretivist entrepreneurship research. Finally, we present a guiding framework and draw on a case example by way of explication.

Ontology and Epistemology in Entrepreneurship Research

The early tendency toward positivism in the management disciplines was reinforced in the first decades of the 20th century by the influence of economics, sociology, and psychology on their evolution. As a result, both in management research generally and in entrepreneurship research particularly, it was believed to be possible to lay claims to the natural sciences' perceived virtues of rationality, universality, objectivity, and value-free knowledge. Thus, calls in entrepreneurship for more objectivist research (such as Davidsson, 2003), follow what currently constitutes a mainstream approach in the social sciences "of (unthinkingly) adopting methods assumed to be successfully utilized in the natural sciences or somehow thought, on an a priori basis, to characterize proper science" (Lawson, 2008, p. 443). In consequence, researchers in entrepreneurship tend to be more concerned with the definition of their object of study (e.g., new venture creation, opportunity recognition, entrepreneurial cognition, venture capital, growth) and the choice of data collection protocols (secondary data analysis, survey research, interpretivist case studies, and so on) than with the philosophical assumptions that underlie their work. Yet, in entrepreneurship, management and other realms of social inquiry research should emanate from beliefs about what constitutes an understanding and explanation of a social phenomenon (Keat & Urry, 1982). "The relationship between data and theory is an issue that has been hotly debated by philosophers for many centuries. Failure to think through philosophical issues such as these, while not necessarily fatal, can seriously affect the quality of management research, and they are central to the notion of research design" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008, p. 56). Therefore, undertaking credible social research requires that the questions asked and the designs employed are shaped by the researcher's underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Thus, questions confronting researchers include the following: should explanations of the social world be deduced from observable facts? (the empiricist or positivist position); should they be grounded in people's self-understandings? (the interpretivist position); or should they be based on whatever enables us to change the state of affairs in the world? (which reflects both an instrumentalist position and a deductivist position based on the generation of effectively predictive theories) (Shapiro & Wendt, 2005). There can be no simple answers to these questions given the complexity of the social world and the ontological differences between positivism and interpretivism. On the one hand, positivism is based on a realist ontology which assumes that observation is theory neutral and that the role of scientific research is to identify law-like generalizations that account for what was observed. On the other hand, interpretivism is based on a life-world ontology which argues that all observation is theory- and value-laden and that investigation of the social world is not, and cannot be, the pursuit of detached objective truth.

The adoption of an interpretivist approach to knowledge creation (Bernstein, 1995) is predicated on the argument that there can be no understanding of the social world without interpretation (Johnson, 1987). In other words, in the social sciences, interpretivist research represents a move away from *erklären*, the deterministic explanation of human behavior by establishing causal relationships between variables. Rather, it is concerned with *verstehen*, the understanding of human behavior which entails, “capturing the actual meanings and interpretations that actors subjectively ascribe to phenomena in order to describe and explain their behaviour” (Johnson, Buehring, Cassell, & Symon, 2006, p. 132). Interpretivist inquiry, therefore, attempts to embrace the complex and dynamic quality of the social world and allows the researcher to view a social research problem holistically, get close to participants, enter their realities, and interpret their perceptions as appropriate (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Hoepfl, 1997; Shaw, 1999). This is achieved by generating thick and rich descriptions of actual events in real-life contexts that uncover and preserve the meanings that those involved ascribe to them (Gephart, 2004).

If we view an academic discipline as a community of scholars (Harrison & Leitch, 1996), then the challenge is for those scholars to bring together insights from multiple disciplines to investigate a set of phenomena that are “neither so broad as to defy the notion of intellectual community, nor so narrow we lose sight of our goal” (Davidsson et al., 2001, p. 7).

Methodology in Entrepreneurship Research

Social objects are realized through the descriptions, classifications, or explanations of the disciplines of social inquiry. Establishing the credibility of these descriptions, classifications, or explanations “entails finding out what procedures (theoretical, practical) are used to produce [them]. This should allow us to say that the objects so described, classified or explained are at least partly ‘constructed’, or produced by, those procedures themselves” (Montuschi, 2003, p. 118). Thus, in empirical social science research objectivity may not be used as a measure of credibility because, “talking of objectivity only makes sense in the concrete context of an assessment of a described objective inquiry” (Montuschi, 2003, p. 119).

Law (2004) has recently taken these issues further: in the development of an “ontological methodology” (Law, 2004, p. 154), the *procedural* issue is how to conduct social research studies well; that is, how do we reflect and enact particular commitments, such as, to truth, politics or elegance, in an investigation? What does it mean, for example, to investigate well the experience of enacting entrepreneurial intentions? (Krueger, Reilly, & Carsrud, 2000); to ask the “why?” and “how?” and “how was the experience?” type questions? Such questions lead to considerations that are broader yet more constrained than traditional questions of methodology. They are broader, in that the concern is not just to “make truths” but to ask what other realities are being made manifest in the conduct of the research (what does it mean, the “why?”—in other words, what is the reflexive practice of the researcher in a search for meaning grounded in research participants’ experiences?). They are constrained, because the outcome of these methodologies is to arrive at particular conclusions in particular locations for particular studies. Instead of there being general rules and universal methodologies (the Holy Grail of the positivist project), “there are only specific and enacted

overlaps between provisionally congealed realities that have to be crafted in a way that responds to and produces [the] particular . . . we are left with situated enactments and sets of partial connections, and it is to those that we owe our heterogeneous responsibilities” (Law, 2004, p. 155).

In relation to entrepreneurship Bygrave (2007) argues that its status is a practical professional discipline in which the fundamental questions are, “what should entrepreneurs do?” and “how can we improve entrepreneurial practice?” Such questions raise the issue of the nature of the entrepreneurship discipline and the implications for choice of methodology:

In our craving for the respect of our academic colleagues we are squandering the opportunity to build a new paradigm with imaginative research methods that are appropriate to a profession instead of a pure science . . . we [should] keep our eyes on improving the practice of entrepreneurship (Bygrave, 2007, p. 25, 27).

In other words, the status of entrepreneurship as a practice-based discipline (Gherardi, 2006; Schatzki, 2001) suggests that its knowledge is bounded by its contextual nature.

Thus, from both the philosophy of science argument and the debate over the nature of entrepreneurship as a discipline, there are implications for choice of methodology in the field. Specifically, the adoption of interpretivist methodologies is a necessary reflection of both the nature of the objects of study and the types of questions to be asked. Indeed, Gartner and Birley (2002) propose that many important entrepreneurship questions can only be asked (and answered) through the use of such approaches and methods. They are careful though, not to enter a debate on whether such research is more “truthful” than positivist research; rather, they argue that the use of both approaches by entrepreneurship researchers is likely to mean that a wider range of questions may be addressed.

The implication of this is that choice of methodology becomes a matter of aptness: different types of research question are best answered by different types of study employing appropriate methods. The challenge for entrepreneurship research is not to reject traditional methodologies—the so-called standard, often quantitative, research methodologies that have been instrumentally effective in a number of domains. Rather, it is to recognize that the traditional approach is “badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular” (Law, 2004, p. 4)—the very characteristics of entrepreneurship research that have been held to justify the adoption of interpretivist type methodologies (Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007). This reinforces the call for diversity and pluralism in entrepreneurship research: “. . . the breadth and richness of understanding is surely enhanced by acceptance of the need for pluralism” (Jennings, Perren, & Carter, 2005, p.148).

Quality in Interpretivist Entrepreneurship Research

As indicated in the Introduction, a pragmatic challenge for interpretivist researchers in entrepreneurship is to determine the appropriate criteria for evaluating and signaling the quality of that research. In the discussion that follows, we employ “quality” as an umbrella term to encompass notions of truthfulness, integrity, rigor, robustness, and aptness. First, we compare and contrast positivist and interpretivist approaches to establishing and assessing

research quality. Next, we draw on a particular study to illustrate the process of validation, not to suggest replication of our practices. We recognize that the research process in any particular study is contextually unique as an investigation into particular social realities and, as such, cannot be readily generalized.

Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches to Quality

In the context of entrepreneurship, though it has not been explicitly articulated, quality underlies the debate over the employment of interpretivist methodologies. The generally low adoption of, and regard given to, such research in entrepreneurship has been attributed primarily to a perceived lack of methodological rigor and attention to detail in those studies which have been undertaken (Gartner & Birley, 2002; Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007). It is, of course, possible that interpretivist studies in entrepreneurship are of intrinsically poor quality (although the definition and indicators of quality remain matters for debate (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008)). Equally, Gephart (2004) and Locke (2001) have suggested that researchers may have undertaken robust interpretivist research but failed to describe the research process in sufficient detail. We propose that the debate over quality in interpretivist entrepreneurship research has been founded on the assumed appropriateness of positivist approaches. We argue here for a perspective associated with nonfoundationalist research, which proposes that the issue of quality can only be addressed by viewing it as intrinsic to the research design, that is, it is internalized within the underlying research philosophy and orientation (Amis & Silk, 2008).

Despite calls for the adoption of more qualitative approaches in entrepreneurship research (Gartner & Birley, 2002; Hindle, 2004; Neergaard & Ulhøi, 2007), and their widespread acceptance across the social sciences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), many researchers, reviewers, and editors still favor positivist research (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008; Pratt, 2008). This reflects the fact that the traditional and still dominant method of assessing quality in research is the theory-driven approach central to the “scientific method.” Such an approach relies on a commitment to the objective discovery of the truth underlying the relations among variables, by means of research that is characterized by the traditional criteria of internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, and generalizability (Amis & Silk, 2008). Thus, it is easier for quantitative researchers to provide indicators of rigor by presenting a relatively straightforward, transparent methodological account within a standardized set of procedures. For the interpretivist researcher however, the task of demonstrating methodological rigor is made much more difficult and complex by the range, variety, and richness of the methodological approaches available to them.

Van Maanen (1979) has argued that it is necessary to reclaim interpretivist methods for organizational research to portray more closely “the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world” (p. 539). Moreover, Amis and Silk (2008) contend that “traditional and still dominant methods of assessing research quality, founded on a positivistic understanding of the social world, are inherently unsuited to producing the variety of scholarship necessary for a vital, dynamic organizational studies” (p. 456). This issue has been identified as a potential constraint on the development of the field of entrepreneurship specifically. Indeed, Hindle (2004, p. 577) cautions that, “Unless entrepreneurship ... begin[s] to embrace higher volumes of higher caliber qualitative

research, the relevance and potency of the entrepreneurial canon will be severely compromised by a lack of the methodological variety that is so strongly displayed in other social sciences”.

In relation to research quality, Amis and Silk (2008, p. 457) state that it is not “something to be tested at the completion of the research or an outcome of the application of methods” (p. 458). Instead they argue that it is inseparable from the ontological and epistemological foundations on which a particular study is based. In support of their argument they discuss three different research orientations namely, foundationalism, quasifoundationalism, and nonfoundationalism and the respective interpretations of quality associated with them. The nonfoundationalist position is the furthest removed from positivism and its associated assumptions of quality. Nonfoundationalist researchers believe that moral concerns are central to the purpose and quality of research, so there is no possibility of uncovering any neutral social facts and that all knowledge is value-laden. “Thus there can be no hypotheses to be tested, proven, disproven, or retested as there are no objective facts to uncover” (p. 457). Furthermore, from this perspective issues of quality are inherent in the underlying intent of the research based on a “moral ethic” in organizational theory that is less concerned with understanding how to design more efficient organizations than with who controls them and the consequences of that control (Amis & Silk, 2008, p. 458; Bartunek, 2002; Clegg, 2002; Hinings & Greenwood, 2002).

Regarding how quality in interpretivist entrepreneurship research can be established and assessed, a critical issue to be borne in mind is the aim of such research. As Cope (2005) reminds us, ontologically no assumptions are made about what is and is not real—descriptions of phenomena begin with people’s experiences of them. Thus, the purpose of interpretivist research is not to confirm or disconfirm prior theories, “but to develop ‘bottom-up’ interpretive theories that are inextricably ‘grounded’ in the lived-world” (Cope, 2005, p. 167). Consequently, quality permeates the entire research process that involves not only a sound understanding of its ontological and epistemological underpinnings and research design, but also experience and skill in the use of data gathering and analysis techniques. More specifically, it entails “carefully and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel it, remember it, make sense of it and talk about it with others” (Patton, 1990, p. 104). In addition, this has to be carefully recorded yet, as Gephart (2004, p. 458) notes, researchers often fail to describe the research process in sufficient detail and to articulate “how research practices transform observations into data, results, findings and insights”. Therefore, interpretivist researchers in entrepreneurship, as in other social science domains, must appreciate that it is their responsibility to provide the reader with sufficient information on the design and conduct of their research so that she or he may assess the integrity and rigor of the research process.

In light of the above, the issue of validity must be reconsidered. Angen (2000, p. 387) has suggested that new configurations of validity depend on qualities inherent in the researcher and the research process and uses the term “validation” rather than “validity” to emphasize how “a judgement of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research is a continuous process occurring within a community of researchers . . . Maintaining an antifoundationalist stance on epistemology implies the need for an ongoing open dialogue on the topic of what makes interpretive research worthy of our trust” (Angen, 2000, p. 387; Lather, 1993; Mischler, 1990).

This process of validation comprises three elements. First, as value-free science is considered an impossibility (Smith, 1990), ethical validation of any interpretivist research study encompasses the moral stance of the researchers (Fiumar, 1990) and is reflected in the focus on understanding meanings in everyday existence and on supporting the development of self-awareness in the research participants. It requires that we provide “practical, generative, possibly transformative, and hopefully nondogmatic answers to the questions we pose as researchers” (Angen, 2000 p. 389; Van Manen, 1990). Unger (1992) suggests that the ethical validation of an investigation should involve asking if it is helpful to the target population, whether alternative explanations to those articulated are presented, and if we are aware of, or are more enlightened about, the human condition because of it. Second, given that methods per se cannot be the basis for establishing validity in interpretivist research, validation arises from the substance of the inquiry. Accordingly, the substantive validation of a piece of research must be thought through carefully from the inception of the study to the completion of the research process. Creswell (1998, p. 16) observes that such research occurs in a natural setting; the researcher is the key instrument of data collection; data are collected as words through interviewing, participant observation, and/or qualitative open-ended questions; analysis is done inductively; and the focus is on participants’ perspectives. Substantive validation includes the researcher assessing their biases at an earlier stage of the process, reflecting on how these are changed through engagement with the research topic and context, and documenting all this in the final output (Angen, 2000; Bergum, 1991). Accounts of interpretivist research should, therefore, provide compelling, powerful, and convincing evidence for the intended audience (Smith, 1990; Van Manen, 1990). Third, the validation of such research fundamentally depends on researcher quality (Angen, 2000), and it is the responsibility of the researcher to develop a valid interpretation of their research topic because “we have a human moral obligation to take up topics of principal value; and we must do everything in our power to do them justice” (Angen, 2000, p. 391).

These elements encompass the distinctively interpretivist emphasis on the signaling of openness to emergent issues, the paying of attention to negative and deviant (outlier) cases, the separation of evidence and interpretation, the communication of transparency and reflexivity in the methods used, the adoption of an approach which is both faithful to, and critical of, the data, and the exploration of the possible relevance or utility to interest groups (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008). These three elements of validation also have implications for the three domains of the research process namely, research design and data collection, data analysis, and interpretation. In these domains the researcher explains the aim and rationale for the research, sets this in the context of prior knowledge of the topic, justifies the choice of interpretivist methods as the most appropriate, explains the research process in terms of case selection, gaining access and data recording, sets out the process of data analysis, and clearly identifies the implications of the findings (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008; Seale, 2004).

To illustrate the implications of this shift from validity as an outcome, that is, something supported by sound and convincing evidence, to validation as the process of confirmation, we provide a guiding framework that will allow an interpretivist researcher to establish and demonstrate the trustworthiness of their methodological approach (Table 1). In addition, we draw on a case illustration based on one of our own interpretivist research projects. Although we argue that trustworthiness requires the clear and coherent signaling of

Table 1
Validation of the Process of Undertaking Empirical Interpretivist Research

	Research Design and Data Collection	Analysis	Interpretation
Ethical Validation	Moral stance Practical value Understand meanings Research process	Give voice to participants Choice of method	Generative potential Transforms actions Addresses 'so what'? question
Substantive Validation	Intersubjectivity Self-reflexivity Popular & personal understandings Researcher's paradigm & pre-understandings Access	Record own transformation Present disconfirming cases Theoretical candor Transparency	Self-reflexivity Record own transformation Evidence of conceptual development Dynamic research process Transparency
Researcher Quality	Characteristics & attributes	Personal involvement	Craft work

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Research Design and Data Collection	Analysis	Interpretation
Indicators of credibility Moral stance Purpose of research	Visibility of researcher's work	Rhetoric & persuasion
NOTES: Key to Terms in Table 1		
Ethical Validation		
<i>Moral stance</i> : Thoughtful, caring, and responsible approach to the study of the human condition (Angen, 2000).		
<i>Practical value</i> : Practical answers to the "so what" question; not divorced from real life context (Sandelowski, 1995); transformative potential, disrupts received notions of how research is formulated, carried out and written up (Angen, 2000), alternative explanations presented; explanation of possible relevance or utility to interest groups (Angen, 2000; Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, & Locke, 2008).		
<i>Understand meanings</i> : Generative potential (raise new possibilities, open up new questions, and stimulate dialogue; (Gadamer, 1994); signals openness to emergent issues (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008).		
<i>Research process</i> : Promotes an equitable context in which diverse voices may be heard, no-one's voice is excluded or demeaned (Caputo, 1987; Flax, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Lather, 1986); egalitarian relationship between researcher and participants, researcher not a "privileged possessor of expert knowledge" (Lather, 1986); creates meaning through discourse.		
<i>Choice of method</i> : Adoption of approach that is both faithful to, and critical of, the data (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008).		
Substantive Validation		
<i>Intersubjectivity</i> : Shared meanings constructed by people in their interactions to understand social and cultural life; vigilant self-critical reflection (Alcoff, 1994) understanding influences on researcher's prejudgments and preunderstandings.		
<i>Theoretical candour</i> : Conceptual development evidencing how conclusions were reached (Morse, 1994; Sanjek, 1990).		
<i>Record own transformation</i> : Articulate process intelligibly and coherently so that the reader may judge the trustworthiness of the arguments made (Madison, 1988).		
<i>Dynamic research process</i> : Dynamic process of creation of meaning and production of knowledge.		
<i>Transparency</i> : Dissemination and publication of research; thorough and comprehensive documentation of process undertaken so others can judge the trustworthiness of the meanings presented (Madison, 1988; Nielsen, 1995).		
<i>Present disconfirming cases</i> : Paying attention to negative or deviant (outlier) cases (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle, et al., 2008).		
Researcher Quality		
<i>Characteristics and attributes</i> : Good people skills; resilience; patience and persistence; versatility; flexibility; meticulousness; creative and persuasive writer; passion for topic; ethical stance and integrity of researcher (Angen, 2000).		
<i>Personal involvement</i> : Intensive and personal involvement in the process (Sanjek, 1990) and ability to minimize distance between self and others (Creswell, 1998).		

validation at all stages of the research process, we recognize that context matters and the detailed articulation of the validation of any particular qualitative research study will necessarily be unique to itself.

Research Design and Data Collection

The study which we draw on is an investigation of women's perceptions of the experience of raising external finance for the start-up and growth of their businesses (some early empirical results, but not the broader methodological issues we discuss here, have been presented in Hill, Leitch, and Harrison, 2006). As women business owners are not a homogeneous group, and it is no longer appropriate to identify "the male" as the benchmark against which female entrepreneurship is judged (Ahl, 2004, 2006; Carter & Brush, 2004), the research was designed to encapsulate their heterogeneity as well as their context in terms of time and space. To capture the complicated and dynamic nature of the process of seeking and obtaining finance, interpretivist analysis was required to give "voice" to women's experiences in their own right as an underrepresented and underresearched group in entrepreneurship. We chose as our data collection method in-depth interviews with people who had "directly experienced the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 1990, p. 104). Specifically, we used the qualitative version of the critical incident interview technique (CIT) (Chell, 2004) to evoke the full complexity of accessing finance, to allow for reflexivity and self-critical reflection as we engaged with the participants, and for the emergence of disconfirming cases (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundsen, & Maglio, 2005; Chell, 1998, 2004; Flanagan, 1954). Although the use of CIT in entrepreneurship research has been relatively limited (Harrison & Mason, 2004), we consider that in this study its use was fully consistent with a nonfoundationalist perspective that considers quality in research as relational (Lincoln, 1995), grounded in the sharing of experience between the researchers and the participants in the research (Amis & Silk, 2008).

During the interviews, participants were asked to recall specific events from their personal perspectives and in their own words (Stauss & Weinlich, 1997), which gave them "voice." This permitted "self-defined criticality" where the focus was on participants' "personal representation of salient moments" (Cope, 2003, p. 436; Cope and Watts, 2000, p. 112), thereby yielding "understanding of the incident from the perspective of the individual, taking into account cognitive, affective and behavioural elements" (Chell, 1998, p. 56). Our use of CIT in this manner enabled the creation of detailed records of events (Grove & Fisk, 1997) and a rich set of data (Gabbott & Hogg, 1996), which facilitated the development of depth and thoroughness in understanding.

Cope (2005, p. 176) points out that, in designing such interviews, which should allow the course of the dialogue to be largely set by the participants (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), researchers have to find a comfortable and achievable balance between preunderstanding (structure) and unbiased openness toward the phenomenon under study. Therefore, it is the participants who define what constitutes both an incident and, in this case, the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of their encounters with actual or potential providers of finance in the context of their own realities.

Analysis

Basit (2003, p. 143) describes the analysis of qualitative data as being a difficult, dynamic, intuitive, and creative process, the aim of which is to determine the assumptions, categories, and relationships that inform respondents' views of the world in general and of the issue under investigation in particular (McCracken, 1988). This involves "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 145). It allows research findings to be drawn from the dominant or significant themes teased from the raw data without the constraints of more structured methodologies (Thomas, 2003). The primary goal is to generate understanding of the participants' sense making in the research situation.

Our analysis involved close reading and re-reading of the texts (the interview transcripts) and proceeded in three stages. First, to create descriptive categories that represented a preliminary framework for analysis, we identified a number of broad categories or themes through a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We began with a "start list" (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of 13 preliminary codes or categories derived from the structure of the critical incident interview that had been informed by both our own prior understanding of the research topic and by popular and personal understandings of the issue. Second, we broke the raw data down into manageable "bits" (Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000), coded these bits, and assigned to temporary categories those data bits that apparently related to the same context. In doing so, we made a series of judgments based both on our own personal interaction with the data and with each other as researchers and on our commitment to give voice to the participants at all stages of the process.

To facilitate the separation of the perceptions and experiences of the research participants from our own perceptions of those perceptions and experiences in the analysis, we adopted the following procedure. The nine transcripts were scrutinized by two of us, each of whom independently coded the texts on a paragraph by paragraph basis. Following Ryan & Bernard (2003) we "pawed" the text, which involved highlighting key phrases because they appeared to make some kind of sense (Sandelowski, 1995). Third, through a process of "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) we revised and refined the start list of categories, created subcategories and determined how the categories related to each other. This process of constant comparison of the codes and categories emerging from the analysis was accompanied by comparison with subsequent data collected and with concepts outlined in the literature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By comparing and combining categories in new ways, we sought not merely to describe, but to develop new insights into the phenomenon of interest (Hoepfl, 1997). Thus, it is possible to signal in the written account of a research project, the personal involvement of the researchers in the process of analysis, the nature of the researchers' work, the transformation in their understanding, and their thoughtfulness and care in the choice of method and analysis (Kvale, 1996; Mischler, 1990).

Interpretation

In interpreting the outcomes of the analysis, our purpose was to create a small number of summary categories that we considered captured the key themes in the raw data judged to

be the most important in terms of the research objectives (Thomas, 2003). The aim of the process was to organize and structure the outcomes of the analysis according to the issues and topics identified by research participants as being important in understanding the phenomenon of interest (Shaw, 1999), a grounded understanding, “derived from the concepts and categories which social actors use to interpret and understand their worlds” (Jones, 1985, p. 25).

In signaling the validation of the interpretation of the outcomes of the analysis, it is important to recognize both the generative potential of the research, in terms of opening new questions and possibilities (Peshkin, 1993), and the scope for transforming actions, based on a cooperative approach between the researcher and the participants—as illustrated by our study. The process of theme identification may also involve discovery of themes missing from the text, that is, what participants do not mention—contrary perhaps to what intuition and/or prior research and experience would suggest they might. In this study, one such missing theme was “the deal,” yet intuitively one might have expected the nature of the deal struck between applicants for, and suppliers of, finance to have influenced participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of such encounters. Data analysis revealed that participants appeared to be influenced less by the substance of the deal and more by their perceptions and evaluations of the interactions between themselves and the actual/potential suppliers of finance. This finding raises issues for further research and has practical implications in terms of the self-reflexive behavior of both women business owners and financial institutions and intermediaries. Moreover, it allows the researchers to clearly evidence that the research addresses issues of practical relevance through design, analysis, and interpretation, and thereby passes the “so what?” test.

Using the guidance set out in Table 1, interpretivist researchers are able to highlight the validation of their research in a way that is consistent with both their own intentions as researchers and the situations and expectations of the participants. However, none of these signals will be effective if the researcher herself does not describe her own skills and personal qualities (Morse, 1994). These comprise possession of good interpersonal skills including resilience, patience, persistence in the face of ambiguity and setbacks, versatility, and flexibility and meticulousness in carrying out the research, which can be revealed by clearly articulating what was done and how it was done at all stages of the research process. In addition, the creation of intersubjective understanding within both the community of researchers and the community of the researched, the ability to communicate persuasively (to use rhetoric, in the Aristotelian sense (McCloskey, 2008)) is paramount. If interpretivist research in entrepreneurship is to meet the required standards of validation, then its practitioners must be accomplished craft workers (Kvale, 1996; Mischler, 1990), learning the skills of interpretivist research through exemplars, experiential training, and practice.

Conclusion

As entrepreneurship is a multifaceted, complex social construct, we have contended that knowledge production requires inclusivity, diversity, and pluralism in research perspectives and approaches. Furthermore, we believe that to develop knowledge and understanding, all such research must be robust and characterized by integrity and trustworthiness. However,

in relation to interpretivist research, quality has been a problematic issue partly because of the assumed appropriateness of applying positivist criteria to its assessment and also because there are relatively few examples of thorough, rigorous, and robust studies. In this article, we have responded to recent calls for more and better interpretivist research in entrepreneurship by elaborating the justification for, and the procedures to be followed in, conducting such research. We have demonstrated that with due care and attention, interpretivist entrepreneurship research is capable of producing rich data through which respondents' experiences, perceptions, and beliefs may be accessed, thus adding significantly to the understanding of entrepreneurial behavior.

Our discussion has also been set within an argument that the real issue in advancing the field of entrepreneurship is more to do with determining the questions to be asked (methodology) than with debating the methods (techniques) used to answer those questions. Thus, a key issue is not selecting between qualitative and quantitative research techniques, but the more fundamental choice between interpretivist and positivist methodological perspectives. We have followed the nonfoundationalist argument that all observation is theory-laden and context specific, and in consequence there are no external reference points against which to compare research design, research execution, and the data produced. Accordingly, the issue of quality can only be addressed by considering it to be intrinsic to the research design. Therefore, "it becomes *internalized* within the underlying research philosophy and orientation rather than being something to be 'tested' at the completion ... or during ... the research" (Amis & Silk, 2008, p. 466).

Our focus has deliberately been on the articulation of the issues involved in establishing and demonstrating the validation of interpretivist entrepreneurship research. We conclude that quality has to be established, not through some ex-post assessment of the truthfulness of the research findings, but intrinsically through the ethical and substantive validation of the design and execution of the research by skilled and capable researchers. In this way, we have progressed the debate concerning the contribution that interpretivist entrepreneurship research can make to the development of the field.

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Claire Leitch, PhD, is a senior lecturer at Queen's University Management School, Belfast, Northern Ireland. Her research interests concentrate on the development, enhancement, and growth at an individual and an organization level, within an entrepreneurial context. As a qualitative researcher, she is interested in the application of alternative research methodologies, such as critical incident technique and action research, within entrepreneurship.

Frances Hill, PhD, is a senior lecturer at Queen's University Management School, Belfast. She is an experienced researcher having undertaken both positivist and interpretivist studies. Her current research interests include female entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial networks, and business growth. She has coedited special issues of *Venture Capital: An International Journal of Entrepreneurial Finance and Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*.

Richard Harrison, PhD, is professor of management and director of the Queen's University Management School, Belfast. His research interests include entrepreneurship, technology transfer, and the commercialization of university research, as well as public policy and economic development. In addition, he has pioneered the study of business angels in the United Kingdom. He is cofounder and coeditor of *Venture Capital: An International Journal of Entrepreneurial Finance*.