

# *A Critical Evaluation of Qualitative Research in Practice*

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**Abstract:** In order to increase the understanding of qualitative research method, this study evaluates a qualitative research method based on a qualitative study. This paper also identifies some issues or challenges that researchers encounter when they conducting qualitative research and gives several strategies that practitioners might use to evaluate a qualitative product.

## **1. Introduction**

Common qualitative research methods include case study, ethnography, narrative research, grounded theory, and visual methods. In this paper, case study will be evaluated based on a research production about two offshore oil platforms (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). Then some issues or challenges that researchers encounter when they conducting qualitative research will be discussed, and several recommendations will be offered. Finally, some strategies that can be used when evaluating qualitative research will be given.

## **2. The Evaluation of the Strengths and Weaknesses of Case Study Based on Ely and MEYERSON's Research**

Ely and Meyerson conducted a multiple case study of two offshore oil platforms with in a single organization, which they called Rex and Comus. These two oil platforms are traditional high-hazard, male dominated workplaces, while they have experienced a successful reform after that the company's reliability, productivity and efficiency had been increased as well as the decrease of accident rate. The purpose of this study was to explore how men behaved in these masculine settings. The authors offered that whether an organization intervenes traditional masculinity depends on the kinds of goals its culture urges men to adopt in their workplace interactions. When the organization's culture pursues masculine self-image goals, men usually defend their masculine image. Conversely, if the company encourages men to pursue goals which are inconsistent with masculine image, men would release them to undo gender. Based on that, Ely and Meyerson proposed that if an organization wants to reorient men away from masculine image concerns, the organizational culture should promote collectivistic goals, develop a learning orientation toward work, and align definition of competence with bona fide task requirements.

There are a large number of advantages of case studies. Firstly, because of the small scale of case study, it enables researchers to obtain in-depth information which they need about the topics. Moreover, Manion et al. (2011) believe that the data of case study is strong in reality, because case

studies are down to earth <sup>[1]</sup>. The primary data of Ely and Meyerson's research comes from substantial number of interviews and observation that are collected during five visits to the two platforms over nineteen months. The long times observation and massive informal interviews make the data more reality, and offer a detailed account of a social phenomenon. In addition to the primary data, Ely and Meyerson also used secondary data that are collected from a pool of 82 published relevant study achievements. The use of multiple sources of evidence, according to Yin (2004), is another major strength of case studies <sup>[2]</sup>. Finally, case study is relatively flexible. Because Ely and Meyerson's project emphasizes on exploration rather than prediction, the five researchers are comparatively freer to find and address issues when they interview and observe workers.

Nevertheless, case study research has its weaknesses. One of the criticisms is that case study research is too subjective and even pseudo-scientific. For example, Yin (2004) criticizes that the findings of case study have insufficient precision, rigor and objectivity. Ely and Meyerson implemented, presented and evaluated the data that collected from the two platforms, and selected secondary data from a pool of relevant study achievements, all of these rely on their personal interpretation of data and inferences. Another limitation is generalizability, particularly when there is only one case study or the research findings need to be generalized statistically. According to Tellis (1997), the findings of case study may not be generalizable because of its dependency on a single case exploration <sup>[3]</sup>. Although Rex and Comus are ideal sites for Ely and Meyerson to investigate the culture environment that may give rise to unconventional male behaviors, they should not and cannot represent the entire industry since each company is special and unique compared to others. This limitation can even lead readers to a false conclusion since it might oversimplify or exaggerate a situation. In addition, case study research are often considered as being time consuming, money consuming and difficult to conduct. Due to case studies emphasize on first hand and deep data, it often becomes a larger research project which requires a long time and massive funds. In order to gather information, researchers had to visit to the two platforms, and because they are offshore oil platforms, researchers needed to take a helicopter to arrive at the platforms. Obviously, it is not easy to conduct without enough resources or energies.

### **3. Relevant Issues or Challenges of Qualitative Research**

There are many issues which play important roles in qualitative research, and four major challenges and the possible solutions will be discusses below. The first challenge arising when conducting qualitative research is informed consent. Compared to voluntary, informed consent can guarantee the quality of the research to some extent. Because ethics are subjective, every one might have different opinions about one same topic, therefore, negotiation with participants will be frequent. Frequent negotiations might make informants become impatient and unwilling to continue their cooperation with researchers. However, if informants are informed in advance of the details of interviews or observations, and are happy to co-operate fully with any investigation, things will be different. The best way to address this issue is through formal procedures such as informed consent forms (ICFs).

The second issue is the confidentiality of information shared by Participants. Any individual or groups who participants in a research would have a strong expectation that the information shared to researcher will be treated in a confidential manner. However, qualitative research often involves a large number of people working together to share information about themselves, and researchers need to describe and report the detailed findings, so it becomes difficult to maintain confidentiality. According to Stake (2000), too much exposure or disclosure of personal information of participants will bring many negative effects to their lives <sup>[4]</sup>. In order to ensure the safety of participants'

information, researchers should use anonymity of participants and select the most representative information which could reveal their identities. However, more convenient way is pseudonyms compared to anonymity. Moreover, creating an environment with a sense of trust and mutual respect within the research informants is very important, only in this way information can be shared without hurting anyone.

In addition to ethical issues, qualitative research also has some practical issues. One of those is that it requires high quality researchers. Usually, one or two researchers have much work to do together, so it is important to give necessary trainings to them. Researchers need to get trainings in, for instance, interviewing methods, note taking, data recording, alternate data collection methods, and analyzing methods. According to Whiting and Vickers (2010), researchers who conduct qualitative research should be able to aware of their own limitation and possible preconception and ensure they can get the knowledge they need <sup>[5]</sup>. In all, effective training is helpful to ensure the smoothness of research works on the whole.

Finally, because participants' life stories are the primary data in qualitative research, the quality of participants can decide the quality of the research to some extent. Therefore, selecting and recruiting participants to tell their life experience are crucial before conducting research. In addition, it is important for participants to have good ability to think and talk. If participants have difficulty forming words while talking, it will make the research more time consuming, and researchers might have to spend more energies to figure out their meaning. Another point is that participants should have strong mental capacity because they may confront some negative memories. Overall, appropriate numbers of participants, good ability to talk and strong mental endurance of participants have a tremendous impact on the quality of research.

#### **4. Some Strategies That Can Be Used When Evaluating Qualitative Research**

The problem of how to evaluate the qualitative research is not a new research area. As qualitative inquiry includes a variety of different research method, different standards can be found regarding how to evaluate the rigor of qualitative research. However, there is common agreement that one crucial issue in appraising the rigor of qualitative study is trustworthiness. In other words, when research conducting qualitative studies, they need to capture study participants' intended meaning so the results don't merely reflect participants' own experiences and the finding becomes more credible. Therefore, "how to achieve trustworthiness" becomes the central issue when evaluating qualitative study. In order to resolve this problem, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four concepts that work together to evaluate trustworthiness – credibility, auditability, confirmability and transferability. Credibility means the interpretation must be authentic and the research's findings should represent the meanings of the research participants <sup>[6]</sup>. According to Padgett (2008), Auditability refers to the degree to which research procedures are documented allowing people outside the project to follow and evaluate the research process <sup>[7]</sup>. While confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. The last concept, transferability, refers to the degree to which the findings of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings.

Table 1 offers a summary of research strategies that can be used to increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative research project. However, it is important to remember that not all strategies need to be utilized for a study to be trustworthy.

*Table 1 Research Strategies for Increasing Trustworthiness of Qualitative Study*

<b>Reflexivity</b>	<b>A thoughtful consideration of how a researcher’s standpoint can influence the research.</b>
<b>Data Triangulation</b>	<b>Collecting data from multiple sources such as interviews, focus groups and interviews.</b>
<b>Member Checking</b>	<b>Including participants in analysis or returning to a sample of participants to corroborate the findings.</b>
<b>Thick Descriptions</b>	<b>A thorough representation of the phenomenon of inquiry and its context as perceived and experienced by study participants.</b>
<b>Audit Trail</b>	<b>Keeping a detailed written account of the research procedures.</b>
<b>Peer debriefing</b>	<b>Meeting with mentors or other researchers engaged in qualitative research to dialogue regarding research decisions.</b>

## 5. Conclusion

To conclude, case study has become increasingly popular in social research. However, it has specific advantages and disadvantages. In order to make better use of this research method, it is important for researchers to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses. In addition, from the discussion it is clear that ethical challenges, practical and quality issues are integral parts of a qualitative research design. Although there are some challenges when conducting qualitative researches, researchers continue to deploy this method particularly in studies of real-life situations.

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