

Ethics and Writing

Ethics and Confidentiality

The problem

- Qualitative research produces *specific* knowledge
 - unlike in statistical research, the subject (esp. company) is easy to identify
 - in a good qualitative study, the report gives information that is specific enough to give the reader a vivid sense of the subject
 - in particular, big companies are easy to identify!

- Ethical question
 - outsiders can use this knowledge to their advantage, and even to harm the subject
 - in business studies, these outsiders are typically powerful enough: other companies, government, etc.
- Confidentiality
 - subjects may be worried about such effects, and not give permission for a study

- Thus the question, how to
 - protect the subject (ethics)
 - guarantee the subject about how the report impacts him/her/it

Standard ethical procedures

- Consent
 - acquire the subjects' consent to participate
 - “informed consent” means that before the subject commits him/herself to the study, the researcher ought to
 - inform him/her about what s/he is doing
 - how her/his study is published
 - how data is maintained and archived
 - how likely it is that it will impact him/her

- Specific communication about aims
 - when doing research, the researcher may have to tell about his/her aims in detail
 - prepare a
 - “elevator talk” (30 seconds)
 - a set of presentations (5 and 15 minutes, the latter on a coffee break)

- Report as the epitome of attention
 - changing identifying details is normal (changing names and identifying details)
 - but don’t do this automatically, comparability disappears easily with this practice!
 - using “types” in the study: “Rolf” in text is an amalgam of 5 managers...
 - doesn’t really help

- Member validation (remember?) also works as an ethical procedure
 - people themselves can screen out insulting or harmful elements
 - but the problem is that whose job it finally is to control what researchers can say?

But ethics is not just about protecting subjects...

- The above-mentioned procedures decrease the accuracy of the report
 - Researchers have duties to the scientific community as well
 - accuracy is one of the most important ones
 - reports cost typically anything from €100.000 upwards: they have to be useful for future readers and researchers alike

- the job of science is not to tell glorifying stories only:
 - keep in mind the Enron and the Parmalat scandals
 - a body of knowledge is not science if it shows only the PR side of things!
- a good deal of ethical debate comes from medical research, physics and chemistry
 - social sciences may effect the subject, but seldom irrevocably

- people survive: all they have to do is to label the researcher as incompetent or politically motivated
- The world changes: is the company studied still in existence in 2010, when you publish your main findings?

Still...

- Esp. in studying business and institutions
 - keep in mind the press and bourse: bad news may drop company values even when if they come from research
 - accidents: giving out information of a prototype may lead you to the courtroom

Confidentiality negotiations

- Specify some things with companies on paper before the study
 - what you give:
 - what you agree to protect (be *specific*: technical details, agreements, prototyped, programs, etc.)
 - what kinds of “screening” rights you give to companies
 - who owns data; how there rights are renegotiated

- what the company should give:
 - right to publish even negative information after screening the *specified* details: never give the company a right to decide what you can publish
 - who else than you can see the data?
 - Your professor or other tutor? Your thesis committee, or thesis examiners?
 - who reads your papers; a schedule for reading
 - don't put your names to NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) without a very careful consideration

...some tactics...

- listen first, but then tell the standard scientific expectations and reasons behind them
- be specific:
 - with big companies, you typically negotiate with experienced attorneys -- you lose if you hurry!
 - reserve enough time for negotiations
- aces in your sleeves:
 - priority rights to first findings, training workshops, consultant-type relationship at the end of the study
 - promising extras like these may help you to get better conditions and access with relatively little extra work

Writing Qualitative Research

Normally...

- Qualitative reports follow the ordinary “IMRD” formula
 - I: Introduction (typically intro, literature review, theory section)
 - M: Methods
 - R: Results
 - D: Discussion (or results and discussion)

...but

- Some say that qualitative reports ought to follow the structure of research better
 - qualitative researcher works like a detective: finding small cues, following them, creating the explanation
 - the report ought to look like a detective story (P. Alasuutari)
 - Others liken text to poetry or to Brechtian Entfremdung:
 - the text ought to break the reader's ordinary perception, make him struggle with the text

- Finally, some question the "politics of text"
 - ...and try to avoid the typical formats used to "seduce" the reader into believing the story (like narrative)
 - ...or bring out the "polyvocality" of text by, say,
 - placing long quotations from a variety of people to the text
 - instead of telling the whole story from the researcher's point of view only

Evaluating these claims

- They are right to certain extent, no doubt
 - but:
 - IMRD is efficient and accurate:
 - few readers want to spend weeks with one text
 - it controls the reader, but in research, we do not believe what we read anyway before hearing several other opinions
 - what's the point in competing with poets and playwrights in expression and accuracy of language?

At "micro level",

- qualitative research works like any other scientific text
 - any paper poses a question, reviews existing knowledge, tells why these answers do not work, and creates an own answer
 - sections and paragraphs typically follow this format as well

– *Quotes are data*

- readers want to see them to be evaluate your claims
 - just like in statistics, you report tables, equations, and significance levels for each parameter

Finally, timing

- When writing a qualitative report...
 - reserve more time for writing than in statistical reporting
 - writing and analysis coincide
 - writing qualitative research is not just reporting
 - the hardest parts are the introduction and the discussion sections; they are typically written several times

questions?

Sources

General

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(See also Alasuutari's book in Lecture 1.)

Thick Description

Geertz, Clifford 1973. Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic Books.